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ABSTRACT

The 21 stories told in this collection are about successful classroom teaching in South Australian primary schools and show the invaluable role that teachers play in developing sound theory. Each story has been selected from the English Language Curriculum Services Newsletter (ELCS) or its successor English Language Arts Newsletter (ELAN), which have been published over the last 9 years by the Education Department of South Australia. The book is divided into three sections entitled "Setting Up Children for Success," "Learning from Children," and "Supporting Student Independence," and the stories they contain reflect the multiple roles that teachers play in the development of children. The teachers whose stories are included have been particularly open to all they learn from children, testing out their hunches and responding to what they observe children doing. Their stories are a testament to the complexity, challenge, and satisfaction of teaching. (MG)

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SUCCESS STORIES

from the classroom

edited by Lynne Badger,
Phil Cormack & Joelie Hancock

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PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHING ASSOCIATION

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Success Stories from the Classroom 1

SUCCESS STORIES

from the classroom

1

edited by
Lynne Badger, Phil Cormack & Joelie Hancock

PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHING ASSOCIATION

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Preface

The stories told in this book are about successful classroom teaching in South Australian primary schools. (Primary school begins with Reception for five-year-olds and runs through to Year 7.) When it's particularly relevant, a few writers have drawn on their high school experience as well.

Each story has been selected from the ELCS (English Language Curriculum Services) Newsletter or its successor ELAN (English Language Arts Newsletter), which have been published over the last nine years by the Education Department of South Australia. These Newsletters have been distributed state-wide to R-7 schools as a source of information and support, and teachers and teacher developers have returned to articles in the different issues again and again. So, with permission from the Education Department and the authors, we decided to collate and publish selected articles to make them accessible to a greater number of teachers.

When the ELCS Newsletter began in 1981 it was a straightforward newsletter, with news and notices of events from around the state, and an occasional short article or programming idea from teachers. The editor was Lynne Badger. Readers provided consistent feedback that what they valued most was writing by their peers. Terms like 'realistic', 'warts and all', 'practical' and 'useful' told of the use that classroom teachers were making of such material. The ELCS Newsletter quickly grew into a major publisher of teachers' writings about their classrooms, reflecting a major commitment by teacher educators in the state to a partnership with classroom teachers in curriculum and professional development.

The English Language Curriculum Services Unit, which produced the ELCS Newsletter, was responsible for developing the R-7 Language Arts curriculum documents in South Australia between 1981 and 1986. Its work culminated in the development of ELIC, the Early Literacy Inservice Course, and the articles from that period reflect the ELCS team's practice of working with teachers and encouraging them to examine and write about their practice. They also reflect the strong ties between the South Australian College of Advanced Education and the Education Department. Many of the Newsletter articles began as an assignment in the Graduate Diploma of Reading and Language Education and were recommended by Barbara Comber, a College lecturer who was seconded to the ELCS team for a year and continued to support the Newsletter.

Phil Cormack took over as editor of ELAN in 1986. From 1987 LLIMY (Literacy Learning in the Middle Years), an inservice program for Years 4-9 teachers, was being developed in South Australia. Phil was able to select from and publish an increasing amount of classroom research which came from the classroom teachers involved in LLIMY. The LLIMY program further promoted the intersystemic links between the College, the Education Department, the Catholic Education Office and some independent schools. Many Newsletter articles were originally reports of data gathering by teachers as part of their two-year training course through the College to become LLIMY tutors.

The articles we have selected are grouped in five sections, published in two Parts. Part One contains sections 1-3, Part Two will contain sections 4 and 5. The five sections are entitled:

Setting Up Children for Success

Learning from Children

Supporting Student Independence

Teachers Intervene

Teachers Solving Problems.

These sections reflect the multiple roles that teachers play in the development of children. Teachers set up the environment that invites learning and make explicit what is to be learnt, they take notice of what particular children can and cannot do, and on the basis of what they notice they make decisions about when and how to intervene in a child's learning. They select from a wealth of knowledge about processes, resources, effective strategies and about their students to make these teaching decisions. The stories which follow provide glimpses into those decisions.

The stories also show the invaluable role that teachers play in developing sound theory. Teachers are the experts on how children learn in classrooms. They are the ones who are close enough to the learners to find out what children can do. And the writers included have been particularly open to all they learn from children, testing out their hunches and responding to what they observe children doing. They show how often they learn from children and as a result revise their working theories on the most effective ways they can support and promote learning.

These stories are a testament to the complexity, challenge and satisfactions of teaching.

Lynne Badger
Phil Cormack
Joelie Hancock

Setting Up Children for Success

INDIVIDUAL CHILDREN: INDIVIDUAL PERCEPTIONS

Betty Weeks

Betty Weeks was teaching a Year 3 class at Darlington Primary School when she joined a group of teachers who were closely observing writers in their classrooms. Here she writes about one of the insights that affected her teaching.

In the middle of 1986 I joined a group of teachers working with Phil Cormack, a classroom researcher, on the assessment of children's writing. In this project teachers were asked to select one child and build up a profile of this child as a writer. I chose Sheena, aged seven and a half. As I observed, reflected, and talked to her about her writing, and discussed all this with my colleagues, I was more often learner than teacher.

Though Sheena was a generally well-behaved, co-operative child who appeared to be coping satisfactorily in all school areas, I felt vaguely uneasy about her writing progress. There were several matters which attracted my attention.

- Her topics seemed limited to home, family and current 'best friend'. This enabled her to use and re-use a small number of words which she had learnt to spell.
- She did not take up any of my demonstrations, nor make use of classroom resources for topic choice.
- She usually seemed more concerned with neatness and decorativeness. She spent a lot of time starting again, rubbing out, or decorating her paper with hearts and flowers.

I had the feeling that much of the time her writing was a sort of side-issue, used as a tool to cement social relationships (e.g. *Donna is my best friend ...*). It seemed to me that this kind of writing, engaged in habitually, might not allow the writer much opportunity to grow.

Sheena seemed aware of and frustrated by her limited spelling ability, and I felt that this might be the key to her apparent lack of interest in writing. I noticed her using a number of strategies to deal with her lack of spelling knowledge (such as sticking to known words, sitting next to a good speller or getting help from mum and dad at home) but rarely did she use the strategy of invented spelling.

When I had first introduced the notion of invented spelling to Sheena, along with the others in that Reception class three years earlier, it had liberated them from the immediate difficulties of spelling and enabled them to experience the pleasure and satisfaction of writing for their own purposes. Many of them went on to use invented spelling as a tool for learning conventional spelling. On countless occasions I witnessed children hypothesising about how to spell a particular word and subsequently discovering the same word in a big book, on a supermarket sign, on television, etc. With the cycle of success set in motion, their spelling ability continued to grow.

On reflection, I now feel I have some sort of explanation for the way Sheena was behaving as a speller and a writer in Year 3. When children are learning to talk, it could be said that they tackle the 'easy' bits first and instinctively relegate the more difficult tasks to later. Learning to write similarly involves mastering a whole range of skills, including spelling and handwriting. Though I had often spoken to the children about why I wanted them to use invented spelling, Sheena had not been convinced that inventing the spelling of words she did not know would actually help her learn to spell. However, she saw that there was something which she could tackle successfully — improving her handwriting. The enhancement of social relationships was another tangible result of writing and, again, she worked on this to full advantage.

Sheena's distrust of invented spelling as a useful strategy for her led me to think more deeply about how children tackle the task of learning to spell a particular word. I realised that even though I had spent time talking to the children about how and why certain strategies help them learn to spell, not all had 'heard' me.

So for Sheena, and for others in the class like her, I changed my definition of invented spelling. I had been telling the children it was chiefly a means of getting their ideas down on paper quickly, but for Sheena every invented spelling was an acknowledgement of failure. Now, instead of saying, 'If you don't know how to spell it, just invent it,' I began to say, 'You probably know some of the letters; put down what you know.'

I believe that inventing spelling is a useful strategy. It allows children to use what they know and to learn about spelling in a systematic manner, beginning from the outer edges — initial and final sounds — before focusing on the finer details of the middle sounds. Requiring children to 'write down what they know' about a word not only gives the teacher valuable information, it also tells children that they do know a lot about the word in question and perhaps, as is often the case, only need to know about one more letter. This is much more positive and encouraging than saying 'invent it'.

My observations, reflections and discussions with Sheena, and also with my colleagues, reminded me very clearly that classes are made up of individual children with individual perceptions. If Sheena did not find that invented spelling helped her, it was not suprising that she should elect to expend her energies in areas where she could feel successful. Like all learners, Sheena herself made the decision about what she would learn.

With these understandings I was able to find a way to support Sheena and the others like her. I began to ask the children exactly what it was they did when they were trying to learn to spell a word. Some of the strategies they identified were these.

- Look at the word from left to right and try to write it down in 'chunks' of letters, not one letter at a time.
- Look for little words in the word.
- Think of another word that is a bit like that word, e.g. *mouse*, *house*.
- Look for things you don't expect; e.g. the *a* in *swapped* sounds like *o*.
- Look for things we've been talking about; e.g. the *e* sound at the end of a word is more likely to be spelt with a *y* than an *e*: *happy*, *silly*, *every*, etc.
- Make up sentences (mnemonics); e.g. *be a utiful girl*.

When we began to talk about 'how to do it', Sheena frequently made comments which showed me that she was actively engaged with learning how to spell. Previously her major spelling strategies had had to do with learning how to locate words. I began asking her, 'How will you remember? What can you do to help you know that word next time?' and she began asking herself the same questions. It seemed that now she was ready and willing to tackle this aspect of her learning.

YEAR 1s TAKE CHARGE OF THEIR READING

Kate Smith

Kate Smith, a junior primary teacher at Seymour College Junior School, was in her second year of training as a LLIMY tutor when she described how and why her Year 1 students kept a reading log.

Recently I reviewed my reading program. It's hard to review a program that's integrated into the whole day, but I felt that because of changes in my writing program, with the children taking more control, I needed to follow suit with reading.

I was excited by the book *Read On: A Conference Approach to Reading* by Hornsby et al. (Martin Educational, 1986) and felt that I could adopt some of the ideas in my room. I was particularly interested in the idea of children keeping their own records and doing written reviews. I saw this as being an extension of my writing program, where the children were being exposed to a different form of writing.

Before I began, I wanted to be clear about why I would get children to keep a reading log and do book reviews. After all, they were only six and I wanted to maintain the fun in their reading. I also wanted to enhance their desire to read and wanted them to focus on their purposes for reading. I was clear on what I didn't want.

1 I didn't want it to be a cop out for me, with the children keeping their own records without any support at all.

2 I didn't want it to develop into a competition over who had read the most.

3 I didn't want children to feel pressured by any extra task. I was aware of their age and what busy writers they were already.

4 I didn't want any review exercise to be more important than the actual event, the enjoyment of reading a book.

Discussion with the children

I decided to hold a meeting with the class to discuss my ideas about extending our reading program. I explained I wanted them to take more responsibility for taking records and to think more about why they read what they read.

I showed them the records I kept and told them how we could set up records which would be useful for them and me. I explained I wanted records which they could use to look back on their achievements, which I could use to keep track of their reading (especially the non-fiction material they were using more and more), and which we could both share with parents.

I was also anxious to ensure that the children didn't take on too much, and so I warned them that I still wanted to hear them read, have groups involved in shared reading and use big books with the whole class. Whatever we developed had to fit easily into the program and not become a time-consuming task.

The children responded by saying that it would be useful to have an opinion about the books they read in their records, not simply a list. (They were thinking of the lists which were a major element in the teacher-made records.) They were also keen to ensure that a special effort could be made in response to books they loved which became favourites across

the class. One child suggested that with such books they could write a whole class big book of responses — an idea enthusiastically endorsed by the others.

The reading log

Our discussion was very productive, but I realised that the issues couldn't all be tackled at once. I decided to begin with the idea of a reading log which would be a personal record kept by the children. The children thought that this would be useful because they would have a record for ever of what they had read. They also stressed the importance of sharing popular titles with their peers. The log was made of individual record sheets secured in a folder.

I asked everyone to do their first record sheet and I was amazed at how they handled it. They knew where to find information such as title and author. They were a little 'surfacy' at first with their comments on why they chose the book, but I felt this section would improve with experience. A few children managed the second question really well and honestly:

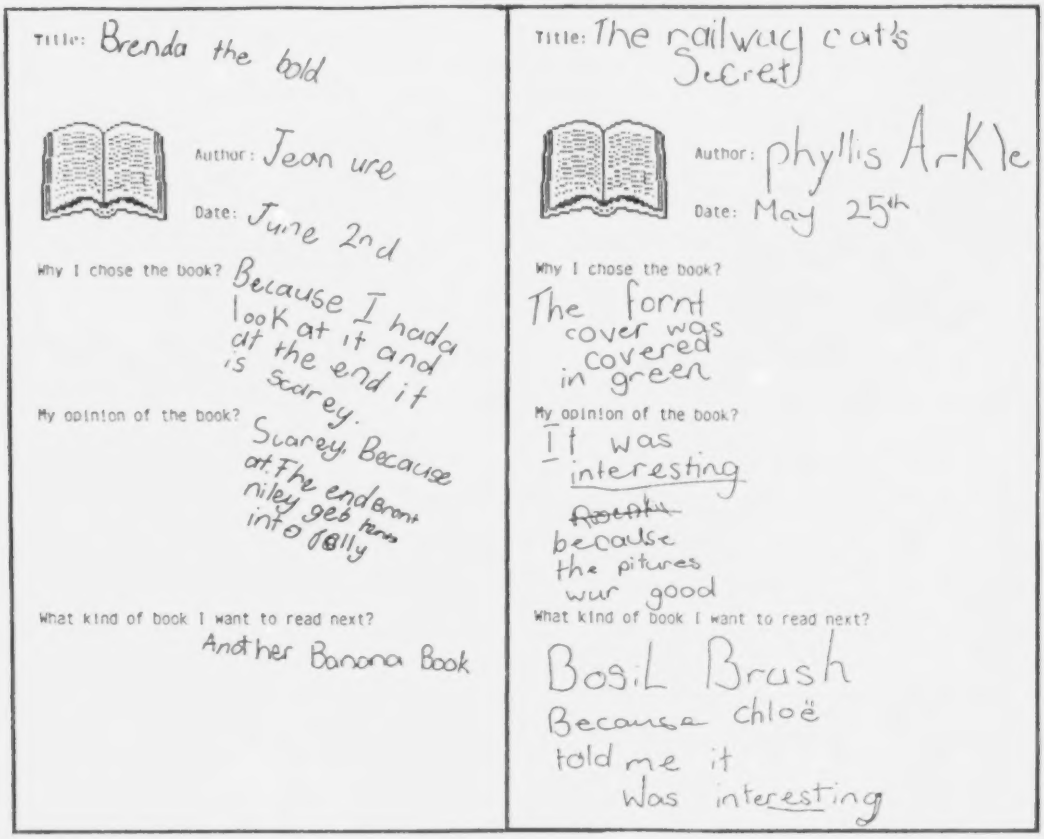
It was too hard for me.

It wasn't too hard. It wasn't too easy. It was just right.

I really like the part when ....

For a first try it was great! The task of giving an opinion is tricky; it takes time for children to master the language.

From their responses to the last question, I found that the children really did have a very good idea of what kind of book they wanted to read next. It varied from being a specific title or a topic, such as a duck book, to a chapter book, a show book, another Jellybean book or a funny book. Many children wanted variety. For example, if they had just read


Title: Brenda the bold
Author: Jean ure
Date: June 2nd
Why I chose the book? Because I hada look at it and at the end it is scarey.
My opinion of the book? Scarey. Because at The end aron niley geb him into Billy
What kind of book I want to read next? Another Banana Book
Title: The railway cat's Secret
Author: phyllis Arkle
Date: May 25th
Why I chose the book? The fornt cover was covered in green
My opinion of the book? It was interesting because the pitures wur good
What kind of book I want to read next? Basil Brash Becausa chloë told me it Was interesting

a long novel, they may have suggested reading a shorter book next time. Some made simple comments like 'I want a change'. This really helped me when it came to selecting the next book.

A sense of excitement took over our reading with children sharing comments and organising to swap books the next day. The report provided a real purpose and it didn't take long for the children to fill it out.

I was pleased by the way the logs supported the children in going beyond listing author and title to giving opinions about their reading. Overall the logs helped them to realise that they did have opinions and did know about different books. However, they needed time and support to articulate their opinions. I provided this mainly by spending lots of time chatting with groups, where I intervened by asking questions such as:

'You say it was fun — what was fun about it?'

'Show me the bit that you mean; what were the words used?'

We also developed lists of words for describing books, which were available to the whole class.

Over time the section of the log that revealed most about the children as readers was the question about what kind of book they wanted to read next. It seemed to help them focus their thinking and make a decision about what had or hadn't worked for them in their reading. Their responses showed me what they knew about text selection and the basis of their selection. They also found it the easiest question to complete.

The variety of responses included:

- comments about selecting easier / harder books
- looking for texts with the same topic or a related title
- looking for texts in the same series
- looking for texts from the same publisher, such as Young Puffins and Banana Books (the children used the logos as a guide to difficulty and likely appeal).

Ideas other than the reading log that were raised in our initial discussion also resulted in exciting work from my students. In particular, the idea of developing a big book in response to class favourites proved to be a real winner. We developed a big book about Mem Fox, which has itself been a class favourite.

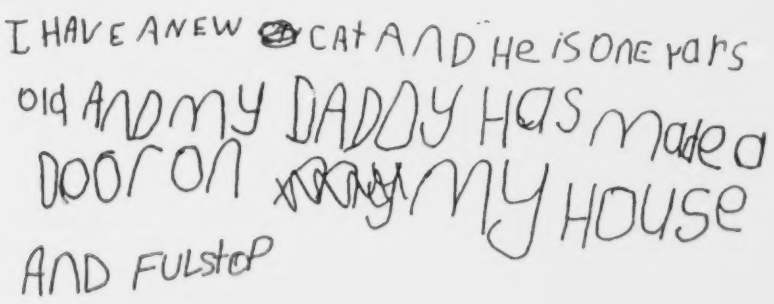
Overall, the children's involvement in keeping records of their reading and their reflecting on its value to them helped my reading program become more like my writing program. The changes also helped them take more control of the program and guided me towards the best ways to support their development. It seemed we had come a long way in a short time.

A TEACHER OBSERVES; A CHILD SUCCEEDS

Lyn Wilkinson

Lyn Wilkinson was a teacher at Hackham East Junior Primary when (like Betty Weeks) she joined Phil Cormack and a group of teachers investigating practical classroom strategies for assessing children's writing. Each group member developed an in-depth profile of a child who for some reason interested or frustrated them. Darryl was one such child.

Darryl is a great writer. He is five years old and began school in August. On 9 February, six months later, he wrote:



I have a new cat and he is one years old and
my daddy has made a door on my house and fullstop

But Darryl hasn't always been a writer. What follows is an account of how careful observation on my part supported him in becoming successful.

Darryl frequently 'visited' my classroom while he was still at kindergarten, both with the regular kindy group and when his mother came to help in his older brother's classroom. During these visits I noticed that Darryl responded quickly to my instructions, that he was able to concentrate on tasks for long periods of time, that he knew lots about both numbers and letters, and that he was delighted when he completed a task and liked to have it recognised.

However, when he began school, his behaviour was not particularly consistent with this picture. As time went on it became worse, and I knew I would have to do something if I wanted Darryl to re-experience success.

Following discussions with some of my more experienced colleagues, I began to make a point of praising Darryl for what he did well, particularly when he was not expecting it. This happened most frequently during my modelled writing sessions. Soon Darryl became more and more engaged in the 'game' of decoding my writing, until he was able to read almost all of what I wrote.

However, I was puzzled. I knew that he was using sound/symbol analysis to decode my writing because I could often hear him sounding out the letters, but he was writing very little during writing time. A quick glance through his folder showed that he was often scribbling, jabbing textas on to the page or, occasionally, writing the alphabet. Another cause for concern was his disruptive behaviour during writing time — he seemed to have no 'investment' in writing.

I made a conscious effort to visit him several times during writing sessions. I was constantly urging him to write, but apparently still without much success. Sometimes I managed to get him to draw a picture and label it (e.g. a rocket, a truck, a semi-trailer), but I still felt there

was a serious mismatch between what he could do when reading compared with what he was doing when writing. Why the confidence with one area of print but not with the other?

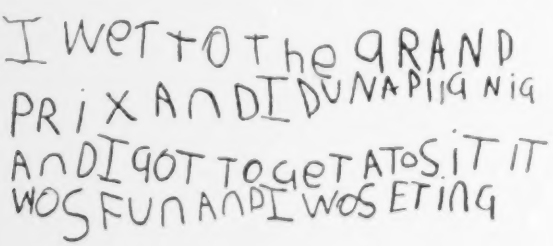
I voiced my concerns to Phil Cormack, who asked me a question which I found very useful: 'What sort of feedback or rewards does Darryl respond to?' On reflection (and I checked this out with some observation), I concluded that he responded to recognition of his achievements, and also to being 'first' (he is very competitive). His own perception, I thought, was that he wasn't achieving anything significant in writing. I was praising everyone for their efforts (including drawing), and so the recognition he was getting for actually *writing* was minimal.

This was my hypothesis. My first step then was to test it by asking him why he wasn't writing. I began with the question, 'Why don't you write something that I can read?' One of his answers was, 'Well, I run out of time because I do my drawing first and then I haven't got time to write.' I ignored that fact that he *didn't* draw (he scribbled randomly), and responded by saying, 'OK, I'll come and see you about ten minutes before the end of writing time and see whether you've finished your drawing and are ready to write.' What I found was that, inevitably, he *had* finished and I was able to give him that little bit of enouragement that got him started with the writing. I then gave him lots of recognition for what he had written, as well as getting him to share what he had done with the rest of the class during circle time and listen to their comments (more recognition).

We were getting somewhere, but still, I felt, not far enough. We had not progressed much beyond labelling pictures. However, I persisted and suddenly, on 12 November, there was a huge breakthrough.

Darryl began the writing session by writing 'A B C D'. When I asked him about this, he said he was going to write the alphabet. At this point my attention was distracted by another child, and when I returned to Darryl's table he was drawing a rainbow and had begun colouring it. Again I asked him, 'Why don't you write something that I can read — a story or something you've done?' His answer this time was, 'But I haven't got a book.' I fixed that in about sixty seconds flat! The cardboard came out of the drawer and the paper was stapled to it, book-fashion. (He wanted 100 pages, but I restricted him to 10.) Because he had chosen a black cover, I got out the silver texta to write his name on the front. I wrote 'D' and then said, 'I don't know why I'm writing this! You can write your own name.' Considerable hesitation. Then he said something which confirmed another of my hypotheses (formulated tentatively when I had observed him doing things like throwing his first try in the bin): 'I might make a mistake.' So I wrote his name and handed him the book.

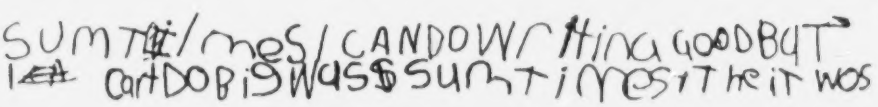
He started writing — *I wet* — and because I had spent some time with him, I moved away to help some other children. When I returned to his table several minutes later, he had got as far as *I wet to the* and was again hesitating and not concentrating on the task. I asked him what he wanted to write and he said, 'Grand Prix'. When I asked him to write that down he said, 'But I might do a mistake.' So Wonder-Teacher came to the rescue again with a solution to that predicament! I told him he could try the word on a piece of scrap paper and check it with me before he wrote it into his book. He wrote it correctly, for which I gave him extravagant praise, and then copied it. He went on to write:



I went to the Grand Prix and I done a picnic and I got to get (a) to sit.
It was fun and I was eating

In sharing time that day I ensured that Darryl was one of the children who got recognition for what he had done in writing time. I knew, both from my questioning and my observation, that this was particularly important to him and would help fuel his desire to write.

The next morning Darryl arrived at school with two pieces of paper, which he gave to me with considerable self-satisfaction. I was simultaneously delighted and surprised that he had written at home. His first message really tickled my fancy:



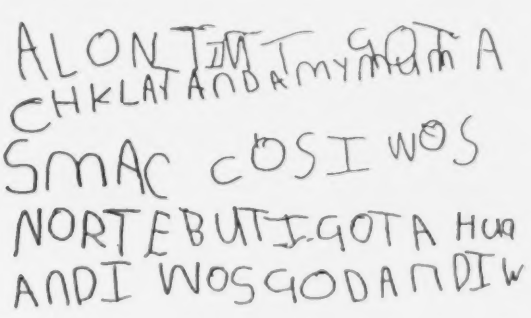
Sometimes I can do writing good but I can't do big words.
Sometimes the (it) words

Further down the page, under a picture of a rainbow, he had written:

Sun does (l) light and clouds don't light but cloud[s] rain

He was delighted that I could read his writing, and I heaped praise on him because I was so thrilled with his effort.

In writing time that day Darryl got his book and wrote the following:



A long time [ago] I got a chocolate and (a) my mum smacked [me]
'cos I was naughty but I got a hug and I was good and I w ...

He paused at 'chocolate' and asked me for help. Again I got him to try on scrap paper and, satisfied with his result, he went on. He then tried 'smack' on paper without prompting, and continued with his recounting until he ran out of both time and paper!

This year Darryl has gone on writing and has been very successful, because he has found the intrinsic reward that comes from achieving his intentions. Not that he always writes: quite often I notice that he has drawn a picture or, as in the piece at the beginning of this article, has stopped writing so that he would have time to draw (something he loves and that the other kids — and I — tell him he is good at).

In the beginning it would have been easy for me to label Darryl as 'capable but lazy'. (Yes, the thought did cross my mind!) However, that label would not have helped him to find the self-satisfaction which motivates successful writing.

Using observation to focus in on specific situations did help. Through careful observation I knew what he was *actually* doing in language time, and how he responded in particular situations. This allowed me to say precisely what helped him to be a successful learner-reader and to 'fine tune' my hunches about why he wasn't being as successful as I thought he could be in writing.

I was then in a position to work out what would be powerful 'Why?' questions, and to keep repeating them until Darryl eventually confronted and answered them. *His* answers allowed me to help him overcome what *he* saw as difficulties and to support his writing development by helping him to experience what *he* saw as success.

NON-FICTION IN A JUNIOR PRIMARY CLASSROOM

Kate Smith

Kate Smith is a junior primary teacher at Seymour College as well as a tutor in the LLIMY program. Here she describes how she used big books to help her students learn to read and write non-fiction.

I was very concerned about the lack of appropriate non-fiction texts available for young children on the themes that we do in our classroom. I have always seen great value in making my own books with the children, especially big books, but most big books that we had made or purchased were fiction, and I suddenly realised that I could use the same enlarged format to present factual information.

With this in mind I began the term enthusiastically, thinking of the amount of information I could cover on the theme of farms and animals. I also intended to have some animals at school to provide real experiences for the children.

Lambs

Petite, the lamb, arrived on the third day of school after we had had a sad experience on the first day, when we lost a lamb that was only a few hours old. We decided that if we

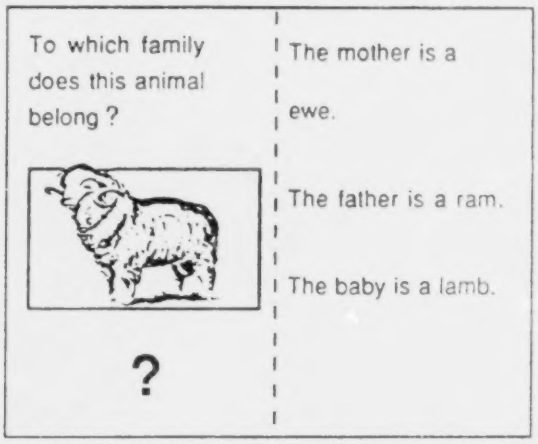
were going to look after such a young lamb, we needed to know a lot about it, record this information and share it with others who were also going to look after the lamb. We brainstormed things that we wanted to record, sorted them, decided on the information that was most relevant, and finally made the decision that we were happy with the information we had collated. I took the information home and wrote it up into a book, which the children then illustrated.

This book has been read and re-read hundreds of times because it has so much meaning for the children. In addition to publishing the big book as a whole class the children completed individual projects, 'All about Lambs'. This allowed them to confirm and extend the knowledge they had gained while producing the big book.

Following this we began reading more about animal families, including a book called *Little Chicks' Mothers and All the Others*, with the purpose of learning the names of the members of a family, e.g. a mother sheep is a ewe. A few years ago I had made this title into a big book, but only this year did I realise that it could be improved. The children and I looked critically at the big book of *Little Chicks' Mothers* ... and I was staggered by the comments and suggestions they offered. They showed they could evaluate aspects such as:

- using words others might not understand
- providing incorrect information
- providing insufficient information
- concentrating on rhyme to the detriment of the message.

After a lengthy analysis, we decided on a list of information we would like to include in our revised version. The children also decided that they wanted to write the book for the Reception class, and knowing their audience made it easier for them to be clear and specific about which information to include. I suggested a question approach, with *To which animal family does this belong?* written on every page. The children accepted this idea and decided to place a photograph of the animal underneath the question, with a big question mark under that. This was to be followed by an answer on the next page.



Not only did this book become an excellent source of information — its repetition and simplicity enabled all children to read it successfully.

Chickens

The chickens were our next acquisition, and to assist in teaching about the growth of the egg I made a big book which began, 'We have two chickens at school ....' It went on to record the major events as they occurred:

- eggs, i.e. hens/incubation
- 21 days of development in the egg
- the chicken hatching
- caring for our chickens.

Recording facts like this in book format is the most effective way I know of helping young children to process and understand information.

Cows

My most recent book is the one I consider the most effective because it includes many different models for children. It is entitled *Daisy the Dairy Cow* and I made it without any discussion with the children. I wrote it specifically for this class, to develop their understanding of the dairy cycle. I started with Daisy in the pasture eating grass and followed the cycle all the way through to the dairy products we purchase from the shop, including such things as:

- the cycle of Daisy's day
- her four stomachs
- life on a dairy farm
- the milk factory
- processing of products
- flow chart from pasture to product.

The book contains a lot of information, and when I first read it to the children, I thought that perhaps I had gone into too much detail. However, I was quickly proven wrong as they listened, asked questions, remembered the information and read the book many times on their own. I decided that presenting children with detailed information in big book format, as well as giving them the real experience of a visit to a dairy farm and a milk factory, was a very useful teaching strategy.

Other topics

We are now all actively involved in the production of a variety of non-fiction big books — for example:

- books which I make on my own to use as a teaching resource (e.g. *Daisy the Dairy Cow*)
- books that children make from their own experiences (e.g. *How to Care for a Lamb*)
- books of facts which allow me to focus on specific aspects of writing (e.g. in *Does This Animal Live on a Farm?* the title question is repeated on every page so that children's understanding of the meaning of a question and the use of a question mark is reinforced)
- books which convey maths concepts (e.g. a time book that has a clock with moveable hands on every page, and a money book called *Our Australian Coins*, where each coin is introduced together with facts about design and value)
- evaluative non-fiction, where we produce a book towards the end of a theme to record all the information we have learnt about a specific topic (e.g. *All about Bears*).

I set up frequent opportunities for the children to plan the making of a book, and we often look at books already produced and work out ways of modifying them or elaborating on them so that the information is conveyed in a more useful or meaningful way to a particular audience. As a result the children have learnt to differentiate between fiction and non-fiction,

and this has helped them to critically analyse material, concentrating on the information they consider to be important and how it is presented. They are fully involved in considering the ideas, the information they wish to convey, the format, evaluation of the text and, finally, the production and reading of the book.

I am convinced that this has extended the children's general knowledge, their reading and writing ability and critical appreciation, and their understanding of reading for a purpose. Not only have I been able to build up my classroom collection of information and non-fiction materials, but I have also struck on a way of helping very young children to operate effectively on information texts.

INDEPENDENT READING FROM THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

Lyn Wilkinson

Lyn Wilkinson is now a lecturer in Language Arts at SACAE, Sturt. Here she draws on her recent experience as an R/2 teacher at Hackam East Junior Primary School.

Many children come to school believing that they can write, and teachers are capitalising on this by giving children time to write independently from their first day of school.

Not so many children believe that they can read, but there are still a significant number who say things like, 'I can read my books at home', or, 'I can't read everything, only the things I know.'

So, I asked myself, why not independent reading from the first day of school? Even those children who say they can't read have come to school expecting to learn how. I decided to capitalise on this and to have independent reading from the first day.

The challenge was to convince each child that she or he could read, and then to provide time with books. My strategy — and it's so simple that I'm sure it is not a new idea — was to use stories with simple texts and strong picture clues for reading aloud. I chose Brian Wildsmith's books *Cat on the Mat*, *All Fall Down* and *Toot Toot* (Oxford University Press).

I read *Cat on the Mat* to the children and, of course, by the time I got to the third page they were joining in. The text is very simple. It begins, 'The cat sat on the mat', with a picture of a cat sitting on a rug. On the next page the illustration shows a dog sitting on the rug — with the cat sitting as far away as possible — and the text reads, 'The dog sat on the mat.' The story continues with the cat being more and more crowded and threatened by other animals until she shoos them all away.

We read the book again together and then did the same with the other two titles. I finished the session with *Cat on the Mat*, asking the children to read along. 'Who can read this by themselves?' I asked. Of course they were all confident that they could. How wonderful! After just a few minutes all the children in the class had learnt to read. How pleased I was, and what success they felt! Wouldn't their parents be surprised at how clever they were!

'What about these?' I asked, showing the other two titles. A number of children indicated they could read these stories too. I gave out multiple copies so that each child had one, which

they then read to themselves or to a friend. These books went home, with an appropriate note for the parents, for reading that night.

The children all believed that they had learnt to read on their first day at school. Whilst some children commented later that they couldn't read, all were sure that they could read particular texts. So they could read — they just had a lot more to learn!

This was a simple, yet very positive start to my reading program. You might like to try it.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS' COMPREHENSION OF TEXTS

Moira Neagle

Moira Neagle is a LLIMY tutor and English teacher at Aberfoyle Park High School. In this article she describes how she helps her students become more active readers of the novels and other texts she provides in her English classes.

For some time now the setting of comprehension questions at the end of a shared reading experience has worried me. I have found that questions with answers stated explicitly in the text are handled easily by my students. However, questions that require the use of background knowledge or the making and supporting of judgements about the content are not handled so well: responses tend to be ambiguous and superficial.

My concern over this has led me to review my whole approach to comprehension, and I am now using a variety of strategies to help students interact more successfully with texts.

Strategies with texts

- Pre-reading discussions can set up students to read with a view to answering their own questions. Asking them to make predictions about the content of a piece from title, cover or first page will give fresh purpose to their reading. Having them research a dominant aspect of the text, or having a group discussion on, for example, what they think life was like in the 1920s before they launch themselves into *The Great Gatsby*, adds to their prior knowledge and gives them points of reference.

- Prior to handing out a range of novels for students to choose from, I often photocopy the first page of each book. Students read these pages, share their thoughts on style, vocabulary and on how they feel towards the characters, and make predictions about the storyline. They can then choose the novel with which they feel most comfortable and begin reading, already involved with the text.

- Having students summarise is an excellent way of helping them to integrate the information presented in a text. By discussing 'What has the story been about so far?' readers can identify the important content and relate one aspect to another, clarifying meaning along the way.

- Giving time for discussion as they read helps students to identify areas of the text which are causing them concern. Problems may include unfamiliar vocabulary or style, and

complicated or new concepts. They can then be taught strategies for gaining meaning, such as re-reading or asking for help. Sometimes discussion can open up their own experience to help them understand a text more fully.

- A natural extension of discussions is to have students pose and answer their own questions about the text as they read. This helps them become much more involved in the reading.

- Prediction activities can also be used all the way through the reading of a text. When students make predictions, they hypothesise about what the author will present next. They then have a purpose for their reading — to confirm or disprove their hypotheses. The prediction/confirmation process also requires them to link new knowledge to what they already know.

Strategies in action 1

Year 10 students were reading S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*. I told them that I wanted them to help each other explore the meaning of the text before they answered a set of comprehension questions.

First, everyone wrote a summary of the story. These were then shared around the class, and it became obvious that individuals found different aspects important. Discussion about the varied perspectives led to the asking of clarifying questions. Little nuances of the story that weren't quite understood, confusions regarding which character did what (the names of Darry and Dally are often confused in this novel) were ironed out. Wherever possible, I encouraged students to respond to each other's questions rather than looking to me for answers. They then tackled the questions set, clarifying first draft responses through further group discussion.

Interestingly the class chose to divide into a boys group and a girls group, and there was a marked difference in how well each group operated. The boys treated the exercise like a golden opportunity to 'steal' answers. They had to be led relentlessly into discussion that would help them to share and clarify ideas. Yet the girls seemed keen to talk openly to see if others had differing opinions. Setting up such processes for collaborative learning is not always easy, and it takes time and patience to help some students realise that such situations are not competitive!

Having reached this point in the process, I asked the students to consider how best they could present what they had learnt about the text. The initial draft responses to comprehension questions, added to the summaries, clarification discussions and questioning of each other, had helped give a deeper understanding of the text, and I wanted them to present what they had learnt in a way that best suited them. Options I provided were a written report, an essay, an oral report (live or taped) or a dramatic presentation.

Strategies in action 2

In my Year 11 Literature of Peace class I became disheartened at the students' apparent level of comprehension. Early in the year I had shown them a film, *Toys*, which animated toy soldiers and artillery into a full-scale battle. We discussed the issue of whether child's play can become adult reality in relation to toys and games. I presented them with an article on the same topic and a set of questions for response. I had worked hard to make the pre-reading experience meaningful, and the students definitely had opinions about the issue, so I was expecting a high standard in their responses.

Alas, I was very disappointed, for they seemed to have only a very superficial understanding of the article. What had gone wrong? Why had they been unable to use the knowledge and understandings gained from the film and the subsequent discussion to understand the article?

I decided to try another strategy. I asked the students to find one article, chapter, poem or song that they would be willing to answer questions about, either their own or mine. I hoped that this would enable them to select materials more closely related to their own experience.

The results were pleasing. Students chose well-structured, coherent texts and obviously felt more at ease with them in relation to their level of prior knowledge. I had anticipated that they would select simplistic texts, but they didn't. They chose articles from political magazines (e.g. 'Contras in Nicaragua' from a PND publication); complex pieces from *Time*; Bob Dylan and Midnight Oil song lyrics. Their understanding and ability to express ideas were much better than when I had imposed the text. In selecting their own texts they had been able to follow their own specific interests and had demonstrated considerable skill in choosing material appropriate to their level of understanding.

Unfortunately a few students couldn't be bothered searching for a text and took an article without much thought from my file of resources. Their responses were less heartening, and I'm considering further strategies to encourage greater involvement on their part.

Summary

We cannot hand out class sets of novels, set comprehension exercises and just expect students to produce the right answers. Comprehension cannot be a busywork activity which we set and from which we then withdraw to the comfort of the teacher's desk. We have to be there at the pre-reading stage, encouraging students to make predictions, drawing on their prior knowledge and asking them to pose questions about the text. We have to constantly encourage them to summarise what they have read and to clarify points of confusion. We need to give them more breadth of choice in presenting what they have gained from the text. Such strategies help students to be successful and to see the value of what they are doing. And we teachers are not tied to the tedious task of marking poorly done comprehension exercises.

REFLECTING ON PROCESS FOR MORE POWERFUL LEARNING

Jennifer O'Brien

Jennifer O'Brien has recently been a teacher librarian and is now a LLIMY tutor. She believes that self-aware learners are successful learners. This belief led her to explore with a group of Year 2 children their understanding of their own working processes.

A recent successful book-making activity with a group of Year 2 children enhanced my respect for them as learners and taught me that young children can reflect on their learning processes. I was working with a class who made trips to the city in groups of ten. Each child wrote about and drew a picture of some thing that he or she had seen or done on the trip. I was particularly interested in one group of children who were given the task of editing a big book

compiled from their classmates' illustrations and reports. The editing process took about three weeks, during which the group cheerfully undertook the task of shaping forty-odd contributions into a coherent whole.

At the time I realised that these eight children had learnt an enormous amount about the decisions that have to be made in order to complete such a task. It occurred to me that I had never before checked to find out whether or not children are aware of such learning. I decided to try to find out if these children were. I suspect that children's learning is greatly enhanced if they have the power, after taking part in a process, to analyse and record what they have achieved.

Thus I gathered the group together and asked them to think back to what they had done and tell me two things: what they had learnt about editing a big book from so many individual contributions, and what steps they had taken to produce the book.

Learning about editing

Their answers showed me the children's willingness to learn and their capacity to take charge of their own learning. They were able to report on the mechanics of the process, to reflect on the difficulties and to show appreciation of the rewards. Their comments on the mechanics were detailed, practical and to the point. They are recorded here virtually unaltered.

- You've got to be careful about:

  handwriting: title at the top; letters straight; capitals up to the line

  capitals: not used in the middle of a word; used at the start of a sentence; used at the start of a name, e.g. King William Street

  spelling: why? ... so other people can read it; also it won't be a proper book if incorrectly spelt

  margins: you might go off the page; you might staple on the writing.
- You've got to have a rough copy first.
- Large print is needed for a big book.
- You've got to put in order:

  pages

  index

  writing

  numbers

  pictures.
- The index must have page numbers.
- You need white-out.
- Writing must match the pictures.
- You have to decide the title on what's in the book.
- You need an adult to help with the writing.
- You need a border for decoration.

Their reflection on the process showed both awareness of the scope of the task and insight into the demands it made on them:

'It's complicated.'

'You need to have lots of concentration.'

'It takes a long time.'

'It's a big effort.'

'If there's a lot of talk you lose concentration.'

'Copying out is hard. You need fresh air.'

'You must be careful copying from little kids' writing.'

'Watch out in case the teacher has spelt it wrong.'

One member of the group summed it all up very succinctly: 'It's great fun.'

Our discussions also gave me specific feedback on what the children had learnt about editing.

- Planning is important. ('You've got to have a rough copy first.')
- It is important to consider the audience. ('Writing must match the pictures.' 'Spelling ... so other people can read it.')
- Successful editing requires a knowledge of how books work. ('You've got to put in order pages, index, writing ....')
- Editing is worthwhile in spite of the hard work and frustrations involved. ('It's great fun.')

Learning about book production

After we had discussed their editing process, I put it to the group that it would be useful to make a record of the steps they had taken to produce the book so that next time they would not need as much help from me. As they called out each step that occurred to them I wrote it down. We checked the list to eliminate duplication and re-ordered it to ensure that each item made sense. The final list looked like this.

MAKING A BOOK

1 Talk together about the book.
2 Write things down the first time.
3 Put things in order so they make sense.
4 Reading to check and see if it's what we want.
5 Deciding on title.
6 Choosing who will write each page.
7 Doing the pictures.
8 Decorating the pictures.
9 Doing the contents.
10 Doing the index.
11 Making headings stand out.
12 Doing title page with names of authors.
13 Numbering pages.
14 Reading to check again.

These children's sense of order and awareness of the need for collaboration were particularly striking. They showed an ability to consider a complex process and to separate the elements involved. Their list has gone up on the classroom wall, where it is referred to when other children are publishing books.

Reflection on the process

I see value in this process of reflection for both the children and the teacher. Children learn that it is possible to think about what they do: they are building their metacognitive awareness through talk. Not only are they learning and doing in the classroom; they are also thinking about what they learn and do and describing the processes they use. And this thinking and talking helps make the process explicit so that it is easier to control next time around. The sort of conversation that I had with the children also gave me an increased respect for them. I had not expected such a degree of self-awareness and such a capacity for expressing that awareness.

Powerful learners do not merely take part in a process; they are able to reflect upon it and learn from it. One of our most useful teaching contributions can be to work with children to promote such self-awareness.

AN APPROACH TO PROJECT WRITING

Lisa Hollis

Formerly a teacher librarian at St John's Lutheran School at Belair, Lisa Hollis is now a LLIMY tutor. In this article she describes how she helped a group of Year 7 students develop their 'project writing' abilities — without even opening a book.

Project writing has concerned me for some time. As a teacher librarian, I am very familiar with students' attempts to manufacture projects under the impulse of their sometimes odd interpretations of what teachers expect. There is a feverish search for information on a topic that often they know nothing about. They may have selected the topic because the library holds lots of books on it, or because they can pad out limited written information with heaps of visuals. Topics are often broad, students have no direction for their information search, and many lack the skills to sieve through the available material proficiently. To circumvent these problems I decided to pursue a different approach — one that initially focused on the students as the main source of information.

I involved a Year 7 class in a series of activities through which we explored topics using the students' knowledge, language and factual writing skills until they became familiar with the process outlined below.

- Generate a topic that is 'familiar'.
- Define the topic in general terms.
- Brainstorm knowledge.
- Sort and refine information.
- Pose further questions.
- Consider presentation.

This process helped students approach the task of writing about their topics without losing direction. In the rest of this article I will briefly describe each stage.

Generating a topic

I randomly divided the class into small groups. Each group generated a list of factual topics where members had some personal interest or knowledge. (I believe that students learn more when the information being explored is either familiar or of special interest to them.) Using a process of group consensus, each group selected a topic on which to focus. One group selected 'Birds'. This group consisted of two boys, Llewellyn and Daniel, and two girls, Sara and Chantal. These students had not worked together as a group before, and if given the choice, they probably wouldn't have chosen to work with each other. I closely monitored this group as it explored the project writing process to completion.

Defining the topic

In order to make best use of their existing knowledge of the topic, I believe that group members need to make an individual effort before pooling what they know with others. So I got each student to write down his or her definition of birds, stating in general terms the features that all birds have in common. The students wrote this information on strips of paper to make sharing and sequencing of their ideas easier. (Figure 1)

The students each read their contributions aloud for the group as a whole to evaluate. Where they couldn't agree on the accuracy of the information, it was eliminated. The group also considered some information too obvious (e.g. *Birds have two wings*) and it was likewise removed. Daniel's phrasing appealed to the group and the students selected it as the opening line for their definition. This part of the process saw them negotiating meaning, developing their verbal understanding of the topic, drawing on shared knowledge and being critical readers

A Bird is a warm blooded feathered flx animal and most of them can fly and they all have a beak and wings.
Daniel

A Bird is so a warm blooded animal. It has a beak two wings two legs feathers lay eggs most birds fly and most Graceful while flying on the end of the beak have two tiny little holes for smelling scents
Chantal

The bird has a beak mostly used for eating. Most birds fly and are most graceful in flight. Most All birds have feathers. Birds of prey have sharp beaks and talons. Birds
Llewellyn

Birds have two wings lay eggs have a beark. claws for clinging to branches or picking up pray . some can fly . Feathers
Sara

Figure 1: individual definitions by group members

of factual information. They objectively examined what they had written and from individual efforts created a co-operative definition that satisfied the group.

> *A bird is a warm-blooded and feathered animal. Most birds can fly and are graceful in flight. All birds have beaks (which are used mainly for eating), claws and lay eggs. Every bird has a nest.*

Brainstorming knowledge

Group members were spurred on by their success at defining their topic. They also recognised the value of individually generating ideas and information before sharing with peers. Next, each of them wrote five facts about birds on an additional five strips of paper. The combined knowledge of the group was broad. Sara's facts showed an interest in 'Rare and Extinct Birds', Daniel's a curiosity about 'Flight'. Chantal wrote about aspects of 'Colourisation', while Llewellyn had an interest in 'Predator / Prey Relationships'. As a result they all listened intently as the information was read out by each in turn. The transition into the next task had begun.

Sorting and refining information

It is sometimes difficult for students to recognise the necessity of ordering factual information. The group process made this easier. Since the students had written their information on strips, facts that were about similar topics could be put in separate piles. The group then gave each pile a heading. Eight sub-headings were created in this way. (Figure 2)

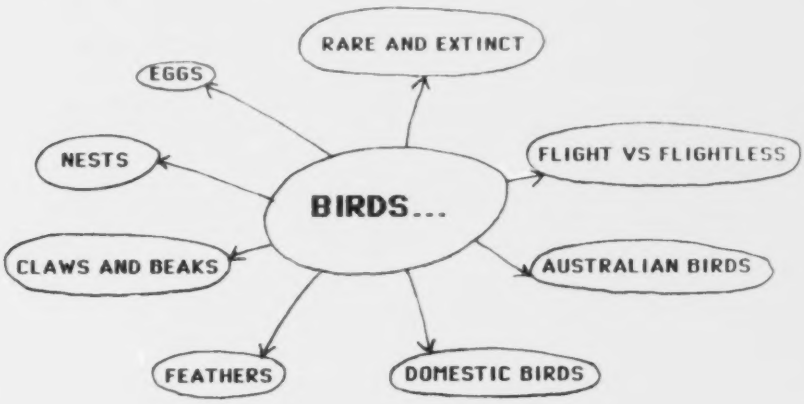


Figure 2: sub-headings

The students closely looked at each category. Again the value of discussion and sharing was apparent. After reading the facts on 'Eggs' for a second time, Chantal indicated that she was concerned about the statement *All birds lay eggs* by saying, 'But not all eggs hatch!' The rest of the group responded to her comment by discussing how eggs break and how other creatures snatch eggs from nests. Chantal wasn't satisfied: 'No, that's not what I mean,' she said. Llewellyn realised she was thinking about the fertility of eggs and said, 'You mean they're not all fertile'. The group was elated by their discovery and incorporated this idea into their opening sentence on eggs: *All birds lay eggs but not all eggs are fertile.*

This example shows the process the group used to refine their information. They were very selective about the language they used as well as the content. Authoritative terms such as *graceful in flight, aerodynamic shape* and *food producers* gave their text a more credible tone. Indeed the language they used often reflected a knowledge of factual texts. Llewellyn wrote: *Birds go right back through time to the terodactual [Pterodactyl].* Had I not known the process he had used in generating this phrase, I might have thought he had copied it directly from a text!

FLIGHT VS FLIGHTLESS

Most birds can fly. Those that can't are often large. Their wings aren't used for flying and lack the necessary aerodynamic shape, or their body weight can't be carried by their wings. The penguin cannot fly and uses its wings to swim. Flightless birds include chickens, turkeys, kiwis, emus, ostriches, cassowaries and penguins.

NESTS

Birds build nests from a variety of materials including twigs, feathers, mud, straw and other materials found in their environment. Shapes and sizes differ considerably. Nests enable eggs to be stored together and hatched. Some nests protect the eggs against predators. Nests may be built in trees between twigs or on the ground. Other birds make mounds, while some build on cliff faces.

FEATHERS

All birds have feathers. The colour of these feathers serves many purposes. The male bird often has prettier, more brightly coloured feathers making it more attractive than the female. This helps with mating. Colours may hide birds from their predators, or indicate which breed of a particular group of birds they belong to. Some birds have oily feathers, such as the duck and other water birds. This stops water from soaking their feathers, helps them to float and dry quickly. Birds may have long feathers or short, stubby ones.

EGGS

All birds lay eggs but not all eggs are fertile. Different species lay different types of eggs. Colour and size vary. The largest eggs are laid by the ostrich and emu.

RARE AND EXTINCT

Birds go right back through time to the pterodactyl. Some have become extinct or rare, even in Australia. The dodo is an extinct bird. It existed during prehistoric times and was large and flightless. The elephant bird was the largest bird known to man. Its egg could hold 5 gallons but it is now extinct. We must help save and preserve our birds.

AUSTRALIAN BIRDS

There are lots of different Australian birds. A few are the emu, cockatoo, parrot and galah.

CLAWS AND BEAKS

Birds' beaks are used mainly for eating. At the end of the beak are two holes to breathe through. The shape of the beak shows what it is used for. Longer beaks might be needed to get into flowers, short, hooked beaks for fruit and seed eaters, and sharp strong beaks for tearing into prey.

Their claws are used for clinging to branches or for picking up prey. Birds of prey use their talons to pick up their captives. They fly high to their nests and then tear apart their food with their talons and beaks.

DOMESTIC BIRDS

Some people keep birds as pets. A few domestic birds are the canary, budgerigar, quail and pigeon. Hens are sometimes called domestic. Domestic birds rely on humans to provide them with food and water. Most pet birds are kept in cages.

The reason for keeping hens and other birds that can be eaten is for using them as food. Chickens, as well as being food themselves, are also good food producers because their eggs are eaten as food.

Figure 3: text of the final chart produced by the group

Posing new questions

The next step in the process involved the students in identifying categories that they could look at in more detail. Here I gave them the opportunity to explore areas of personal interest. Each selected a topic and posed questions that would lead on to a personal search. For example, Daniel was still curious about flight and was interested in pursuing these questions:

How far can birds fly? What enables a bird to fly? Why are some birds flightless?

Sara, however, with her ongoing interest in 'Rare and Extinct Birds', had these questions:

How did birds evolve? Why have some birds become extinct? Could the Dodo fly?

I noticed that the questions were those that the group could not solve on their own. No group member could explain exactly how birds fly or why some are flightless, and an argument had emerged as to whether the Dodo could fly. At this point the students considered information sources beyond the group. They suggested library books, encyclopedias at home and school, the museum, the zoo, and people with a knowledge of birds.

However, as the amount of material already collected, sorted and refined by the group was considerable, they decided not to refer to other sources at this stage. For their present purposes they would only use the information they had generated within the group.

Presentation

The group was keen to share the information with peers and chose two ways of doing this. First, they published their work on a chart, where the information they had sorted, refined and ordered was typed under the appropriate subheadings. This formal record was important to them. They wanted to see their work published and it would be a lasting record of their discoveries. (Figure 3)

Secondly, the group read the information to the class. The other students were impressed by the quality and quantity of information the group provided, while the group members were justifiably proud of their work.

Summary

I value many features of this project writing process. The group wrote a comprehensive project in two sessions. They increased their personal knowledge in an area that interested them and remained highly motivated throughout. They were not text reliant; in fact they hadn't opened a book! Instead they used their prior knowledge and developed new knowledge through group interaction and collaboration. No teacher or parent was pestered for help.

They also developed their informational writing skills. They organised their information into appropriate categories and presented it in a way that was clear and accessible to their readers. Altogether I think they have a powerful model for tackling new or more complex research tasks in the future.

Learning from Children

WRITING: WHO'S IN CONTROL?

Mary Hall

Mary Hall teaches at Hectorville Primary School and is currently a LLIMY tutor. Here she describes how involving her students in planning the writing program increased the options open to them and broadened the range of writing they produced.

For the past two years the majority of the students in my Year 7 class have been involved in a writing program where they chose their own topics. They prepared a draft and then had it checked by the teacher, who usually asked them to read it aloud. The text was discussed — basically with the questions: Who? When? What? Why? How? — and corrections were made to spelling, grammar and formalities. Often there was a time limit; the student had to do a rough draft, arrange a conference and publish the assignment within a certain time.

At the beginning of this year, as part of the LLIMY course, I wrote a 'true confession' about myself as a writer. I wrote about the kinds of writing I do, what I like and don't like about writing, the conditions and places in which I write best, my approach (drafts, rewrites, etc.), the difficulties I experience as a writer, and how I feel about myself as a writer. After I had written this confession and had heard other teachers read theirs, I felt that I had discovered a great deal about the complications of writing. So I decided to share these discoveries with my Year 7 students and ask them to write their own confessions for me. I wanted to find out how they felt as writers, whether they enjoyed writing, and how they went about it.

After two years of writing in a free-choice program, I had supposed that these students would enjoy writing. However, that was not the case. Writing was a chore; something to be avoided.

I avoid writing by watching TV. (Louisa)

I avoid writing by reading or watching TV. (Chos Hou)

I don't like writing very much. I find it a bit boring. (Bronwyn)

I was flabbergasted by these and similar statements. My students wrote only because they had to; because we, the teachers, demanded and expected it.

My next step was obvious: I went back to the students. At least once a week we have class meetings, where we discuss what's been happening to us all. We usually sit on the floor in a large circle so that we are all on the same level and can see each other. We discuss anything of concern to us, collectively or individually. It was at such a meeting that we discussed the students' confessions and opinions about writing.

I discovered that the negative feelings had developed because the students felt they didn't have enough control of their writing. They found the time limits inflexible and they didn't like being restricted to publishing in book form only. Nor did they like having to publish

all assignments. They wanted more time for writing rough drafts; to be able to publish their writing in a variety of formats, not just books; to publish some, not all the drafts they wrote. We, the teachers, were the ones who had introduced the time constraint of three weeks to do a rough draft and publish it, and the requirement that all final drafts be published. The students themselves had imposed the constraint of book form only for publishing their work. In reality, different writing tasks require widely varying times to complete successfully: some take much less time, others much more than allowed for by our original catch-all rule.

So we worked out a plan for Term 2:

- a minimum of three rough drafts of a major piece, with at least two pieces to be published
- encouragement to write for many audiences, inside and outside the school
- a variety of formats to be permitted for publication
- opportunities to use a wide variety of writing forms.

To support these guidelines I established a writing centre with ideas for publication. I also timetabled more sharing sessions, where students had the opportunity to 'publish' their writing informally. All this has led to a far wider range of writing forms being produced, from big books for junior primary children through to information booklets on favourites topics like cricket and hobbies.

Opening up my program to students' input and control has also developed a greater awareness of audience, with students writing for junior primary children, classmates, other teachers, the principal and parents. The range of purposes is broader too, so that students are now writing information booklets and letters.

There are still concerns, of course, like the students who can slip through any negotiated program, but the guidelines we developed are open to revision if they're not working for the students or for me. Certainly I will continue to review the program *with* the students during our class meetings.

A FAILED READER LEARNS TO READ

Lyn Wilkinson

Lyn Wilkinson was teaching English and Drama at Mawson High when she decided that she would do whatever she could to help a failed reader become a successful one.

Paul was almost fifteen when he came into my English class. I found him a delight from the first. He had a wonderful, impish sense of humour, and many of his cuttingly dry comments broke up the whole class. He was a keen sportsman and sailed his own yacht with the Seacliff Club, taking off many of the trophies in his age division. He was popular with his peers, extremely obliging, and keen to succeed academically.

He was also a failed reader. He had spent the previous year in a Track 4 Special Education class because he could hardly read. But that situation was not supporting his development very effectively, so he was 'mainstreamed'.

As I've said, Paul was keen to succeed academically. He handed in quite good 'project work' — good because he had sat at his desk for long periods copying work from other students or from text books. He loved working in a pair or group since someone else would do the writing. (He was always willingly accepted because of the ideas and enthusiasm he contributed.) Here was a student who had lots of things going for him. I felt that he deserved every bit of help I could give him with his reading as this seemed to be the one thing holding him back.

But where and how to start?

I decided to give up my non-contact time so that I could work with Paul for half an hour four days a week. We had worked together out of the classroom for about six weeks, when ...

Paul was reading aloud to me about the Kon Tiki expedition crossing the Pacific Ocean. On the front page of the story he had read that there was a 'soft wind'. The text actually said 'swift wind', and how I itched to correct him! But I squashed this teacher response and allowed him to go on.

Two pages later he read that the raft had made excellent progress.

'That doesn't make sense,' he said.

'Why not?'

'Well, there was a soft wind.' The sailor in him was trying to make sense out of the apparent contradiction.

'Was there? Why don't you check?' I encouraged.

He turned the page back and focused on the word that described the wind.

'S ... w ... swift,' he said. 'Oh, that's better. Now it makes sense.'

I knew at that moment that we had done it. Paul was going to succeed as a reader, mainly because he had started to monitor his own reading behaviour.

And he did succeed. Within days of that breakthrough he was confident enough and functioning well enough as a reader to return to the normal classroom situation. Sounds a bit like magic, doesn't it? But there were some important reasons for Paul's success.

He had come to understand that readers monitor for 'sense', and he had the beginnings of a system for doing this. When meaning broke down, he had strategies for going back and retrieving it. He had also expanded the repertoire of information he could use: he was no longer solely confined to graphophonic cues, but was able to use his knowledge of the world and language patterns as well. Knowing how to operate as a reader, in particular how to monitor and regulate his own reading process, meant that he could read increasingly difficult material by himself.

Principles for success

Working with Paul was very exciting because it was so successful. But what did I learn from that experience that I could apply to another? What are the principles I would use in a similar situation?

1 *Find out what the student understands about reading*

I spent most of the first week talking to Paul about reading and listening to him read orally. It was clear almost immediately that Paul equated reading with sounding out the words. He told me that reading was 'saying the words right', and his oral reading was the result of this understanding. After some discussion we made a pocket-sized card which Paul carried to all his lessons. It said:

> Does this make sense?
>
> Does it sound like talking?

I found it frightening that Paul didn't understand the two very fundamental things about reading implied by these questions. He was one of those students who:

> are so busy matching letters to sounds and naming word shapes that they have no sense of the meaning of what they are reading. Reading requires not so much skills as strategies that make it possible to select the most productive cues. (Goodman 1973, p. 26)

Paul's understanding of what reading *is* needed to expand if he was to develop as a reader. I suspect that many poor readers do not fully understand the nature of reading and I would want to check this out as a first step in helping any reader.

2 *Find out what the student can do as a reader*

I listened to Paul read orally and did a miscue analysis to confirm my hunches about him as a reader. I knew that it was important to 'start where the child is at'; that had been drummed into me at college. I knew too that it would be unproductive to look at what Paul couldn't do; not only would we both be overwhelmed by the task, but it would provide no clear starting point. What I now understand more deeply about learning is that:

> Children tend to work from their strengths — they use processes with which they are familiar before they master new ways of operating. They need the support of the familiar in order to learn the strange. (Holdaway 1979, p. 89)

Paul needed to maintain and strengthen what he knew about graphophonic cues. He gained confidence as he realised what he could do as a reader, and what he had achieved provided a springboard for learning the new.

3 *Help the student to develop new information and strategies*

Paul had no strategies for attacking unknown words apart from sounding them out. One of the most important things I did (in retrospect) was to show him that there are other ways to 'get at' meaning.

- You can predict the word. As long as the prediction makes sense and sounds right, go on reading. If you are concerned, go back and check the first few letters: there is generally no need to sound out the whole word.
- You can leave the word out altogether and then go back and try to put it in once you have read the whole sentence — or the whole paragraph — if you really seem to need it.

Paul didn't seem to know it was OK to 're-run' — to go back to the beginning of the sentence or paragraph and have another shot at the whole thing. Significant progress occurred when I told him about this strategy.

It seems to me that many poor readers do not have access to the strategies which good readers use. I would therefore make a much more conscious effort in future to show students what I do as a reader, and to give them many opportunities to share their successful strategies with one another.

4 *Provide the student with frequent practice at doing what real readers do*

Paul and I had no flashcards, no worksheets, no drills, no repetition. What we did have were stacks of magazines and books, and our own experiences and knowledge as readers.

Real readers, those outside classrooms, read because they want to, because they find reading satisfying and rewarding. They choose their own reading materials, sometimes by asking other readers for suggestions or help. They don't always finish reading what they have chosen. They occasionally share what they have read, but they never write answers to comprehension questions about it.

I encouraged Paul to do all the things that real readers do. If he *really* didn't want to read on any particular day, then we didn't. We gossiped — often about reading — or I read aloud to him. I provided lots of reading materials and gave Paul a 'travelogue' to indicate what was

in them. But he always chose what he would read himself. He usually did this very well, but on the odd occasion when he started reading something that he didn't like, he put it aside and got out something else.

Learning as a teacher

It all sounds a little too perfect, doesn't it? But I did make mistakes. Fluent readers usually read silently to themselves. This is something which I almost never allowed Paul to do — a thing I deeply regret now. The 'teacher' in me was very strong and I didn't trust Paul's self-monitoring techniques sufficiently to let him get on and use them without my intervention. I felt an absolute compulsion to know what he 'was doing' when he read, and so I virtually insisted on his reading aloud. Although this provided me with important insights, I wonder now what it did to Paul's understanding about the nature of reading.

With the benefit of hindsight, I think that I also asked him a little too frequently to 'tell me what that was about'. Again, I couldn't resist trying to get at his comprehension. I didn't trust that his enjoyment of the print, his reaction to what he read, was in itself evidence of comprehension. I must remember that next time.

If you have read up to this point, you may have formed the impression that I knew exactly what I was doing when I was working with Paul. Not so. A lot of it was intuitive, 'seat of the pants' stuff. But it worked.

Just as Paul had come to understand the nature of reading, so too have I come to understand the nature of my role as a teacher. Because we both now have ways of understanding what we are doing and strategies for monitoring that, we both have a self-improving system. This means that Paul has the potential to get better and better as a reader, and that I can get better and better as a teacher. It seems that what ensures success for the reading student also gives success to the reading teacher.

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A 'LESSON' ABOUT SPELLING

Adeline Black

Adeline Black lectures in the B.Ed and Graduate Diploma in Reading and Language Education at SACAE, Underdale. She has watched with interest her two children's literacy learning.

My son Sean was fortunate — he was introduced to a process approach to writing on his first day of school. I was delighted with the results. Freed from the structures of conventional spelling, he showed himself to be a child with an endless repertoire of exciting stories to tell. He took great pride in these stories, and at a quite young age he was willing to spend up

to a week writing and rewriting the content until he was satisfied — or, in his terms, he 'got it right'. Only then, after the story was 'right', did spelling, neatness and punctuation assume any importance to him. However, if he was pleased with his product and wanted to share it with others (in classroom vernacular, 'publish' it), he would happily spend considerable effort and time correcting it.

While spelling conventionally posed a few problems for Sean (a defect inherited from his mother, no doubt), his teachers saw steady, though slow, improvement and were pleased with his progress. For Sean's part, he viewed his spelling as a minor issue — he knew he had resources and strategies for correcting his errors and felt in control. I still remember a conversation he had as he was nearing the end of his junior primary years, when he summed it up very neatly. One of his friends had come around after school — just as Sean had finished sharing with me his latest published book (fifteen pages; the result of several weeks work).

Impressed by the tome, Mathew said, 'You're a good writer, aren't you?'

'Mm, mm,' responded Sean, nodding his head in agreement.

'But spelling's the hard stuff,' Matthew continued.

'Yeah, but what's spelling got to do with a good story anyway?' was Sean's response.

As any school kid can tell you, entering Year 3 marks the end of an era — no more beer and skittles, folks; now comes the hard yacka. Part of that hard yacka is the spelling test.

Sean approached many of the changes with trepidation, but especially the new focus on spelling, and the spelling test in particular. While in the past he had felt that any error could be fixed, now a word was either right or wrong and there were no second chances. None the less he tried hard. Each night I was asked to call out the words — two, sometimes three times. Even so, after one last try on Friday morning, he left for school less than confident.

That afternoon he was slow coming to the gate to meet me. Most of the kids had left when I caught sight of his reluctant body shuffling toward me. I knew the news was not good. My cheery 'Hi sweetie, how was it today?' was greeted with a sullen 'Let's get out of here.' We drove home in silence, and it wasn't until we were inside the home that he showed me the offending document. I was both surprised and relieved: 'Nine out of ten! That's great!' I watched dumbfounded as his face contorted with sorrow and turned red and wet. 'No, it's not!' he choked and ran out of the room. He cried for more than two hours, and it wasn't until the end of this period that I began to understand what was at the heart of Sean's disappointment with himself.

Part of it was simply that he hadn't learnt one of the tacit rules of the testing game — that students are expected to be unsuccessful. Indeed, if they are totally successful, it is assumed that the material is too easy. Sean's view was simply that the teacher had told him to learn to spell ten words and he had learnt only nine. Therefore he had failed. It never occurred to him that his teacher would be so unreasonable as to tell him to do something that she thought he might not be able to do.

When no amount of argument on my part could persuade him that he hadn't failed, I changed my tack. 'OK, so you may not be terrific at spelling — but you're an excellent reader, and super at maths'. His reply was instant: 'But that's not what's important!' Reading, maths, not important? I was horrified, but the message to him was clear — he couldn't get 10/10 on reading or maths (these weren't as yet tested) but success or failure was visible in spelling. Sean believed that what was measured was what the school valued.

However, the real heart-breaker was yet to come. 'I suppose it doesn't count that you're a good writer either?' I said. 'I'm not — I can't spell'. So there it was, two and a half years of hard work, success and joy wiped out by one seemingly small curriculum change.

I talked to his teacher the next day, and she, as horrified as I, talked to Sean not once but several times. In the end, sadly, the messages the test carried were stronger than anything we could say. I think his view of us was that we were kindly but ill-informed. The tension, the build-up, the classroom time given to preparing for the test and the black marks permanently recorded in the mark book were ample evidence of the test's importance.

Sean today is nearly at the end of Year 4 and has learnt many lessons: such as the importance of presentation over information in projects; that reading is the ability to read words in isolation and answer often meaningless questions after boring passages; that success in maths is measured by being able to manipulate quickly rather than understand what you are doing. All of these 'lessons' have been taught by good teachers who would hotly deny believing or teaching any of them, but their means of testing, assessing and grading all carry their own messages.

As for Sean, he'll survive. He's not a reluctant writer, but neither is he enthusiastic. He takes the middle ground, risks little and reveals even less. I don't think he trusts us much any more — perhaps he has learnt his lessons.

LEARNING FROM YOUNG READERS' USE OF PICTURES

Winsome Obst

Winsome Obst was a Year 1 teacher at Madison Park Junior Primary School when she wrote this report on a school-wide survey she conducted with nearly 300 children. She wanted to find out how much children's perceptions of the role of pictures in texts could tell her about their success as readers.

Watching young children read and talking to them about books can be a useful tool for evaluating reading progress.

Swan and Symington (1987) found a significant correlation between reading development and the perception of the use of pictures in story books. Their survey of twenty-six children in Year 1 showed markedly different awareness of the relationship between pictures and text by children at different reading stages. In their study they asked the teacher to identify children as independent readers, dependent readers and beginning readers. After the children had read a story, each child was asked the question, 'What do you think the pictures are there for?'

I was fascinated by the idea that such a simple question/interview technique could provide insights into children's development. It seemed to be something that any teacher could use as an assessement tool. I decided to survey all the children in my junior primary school, after asking the teachers to divide them into the three groups. Even though this involved a total of 292 children, I found it to be a relatively straightforward and speedy way of surveying their development. My results generally supported Swan and Symington's hypothesis and suggested that interviewing children about how they read can provide valuable information.

What I did

I interviewed each child separately, asking her or him to read a picture book to me. If the child couldn't read the book, I read it and invited the child to read along with me. After the story reading I asked the question, 'What are the pictures there for?' Typical responses from beginning readers were:

'You read them.'

'They tell you the story.'

Developing readers showed more awareness of the text but voiced their need for pictures:

'They show you what the words say.'

Independent readers used pictures as additions to the text:

'You can see if they match what you think in your head.'

'They illustrate the story.'

'Little kids need them to read.' (from a big seven-year-old!)

As the children read to me or with me, I closely watched their eye movements, particularly when they looked at the illustrations. As I watched, I realised that children's reading strategies were affected by their need for the illustrations to provide information, and that I was gaining useful insights into their development.

The beginning readers looked mainly at the pictures. They made supportive noises as I read, but were often looking ahead of the page we were reading together.

The developing readers moved their eyes rapidly from text to pictures and back again. Once they had established the predictable pattern of the story, they used the pictures to support the text and aid prediction.

The independent readers almost all took the book from me and looked at the print until there was something unexpected or amusing which surprised them into looking up at the illustration or to me — although some were so busy impressing me that they didn't take their eyes from the text!

To see if there was a relationship between the need for illustrations and an awareness of books, I asked the question, 'Have you ever seen a book without pictures?'

Although there were some exceptions, again the stage of development seemed to affect their awareness of such books. The beginning readers tended to deny the existence of such an unlikely concept, while dependent readers consigned such things to grown-ups or for when they were bigger. The independent readers reported there were 'chapter books', dictionaries and books with a few pictures not necessarily matching the text on the page. I knew that all these children had access to unillustrated texts and were sometimes read stories with no pictorial support, but it seemed that their awareness was influenced by their own understandings as readers.

Later I invited some children to read their own illustrated stories to me. When reading their own writing, they exhibited similar levels of dependence on pictures according to their stage of development. Beginning readers expected the pictures they had drawn to clarify the meaning of the text, and they often read the story with no reference to the string of letters they had written. The dependent readers, who had become aware of graphophonic connections, tended to ignore their drawings even when they came to parts of their writing they found difficult to decode. What seems to happen is that, with development, children tend to use pictures more and more as a support for their stories, rather than as something carrying the bulk of the meaning.

Overall I found this an informative exercise. Interestingly, the teachers' groupings of the children were overwhelmingly supported by my study — the few differences of perception being a useful indicator of the need for further investigation. Surveying children's perceptions of the use of pictures can be a helpful strategy for evaluating children's understandings about reading.

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CHILDREN HELP A TEACHER TO WRITE

Chris MacLeod

Chris MacLeod teaches at Fulham Gardens Primary School. She describes what happened and what she learnt through involving her students as she wrote a story. She outlines how her students helped her and, as a result, learnt about writing and helping each other.

In my daily one-hour writing sessions I have been concentrating on my role as a writer in the classroom and trying out a variety of ways of participating and/or modelling. Eventually, as a result of a piece I had begun as part of a college course, I decided to write a short story for my Year 5 class and work through it with them, using them as sources for ideas and having them help me in different ways. I kept a journal to jot down everything that happened right from the first day, when I shared my opening paragraph with a group of four children, to when I took time out to write these observations.

My short story is not yet finished, mainly because it has developed into a novel. And the process will not end even when the story does, as I have found the whole experience to be a useful approach in the teaching of writing.

Why I wanted to write in the classroom

As a classroom teacher, I wanted to be clear about my aims for this activity and incorporate them into my normal program. I wanted to:

- make myself truly experience the problems tackled by writers, so that my own questioning would be more helpful during future work with the children
- demonstrate my respect for the children as fellow writers and open up communication between us as writers
- have the children identify more easily the problems that occur during writing and how they may be resolved
- publish a piece of writing which would be a source of enjoyment to the children as individuals and as a shared reading experience
- demonstrate an awareness of audience
- demonstrate a sense of purpose in my writing.

What we did

To begin, I wrote an opening paragraph, a short precis of the story to come, and two more paragraphs to give the children an idea of the style I hoped to develop. Having done this, I started the 'in-class' work. I tried to keep a balance between the time I spent on my own writing and that spent working with the children on theirs. I didn't want them to feel that I thought my writing was more important than theirs, but I did make it very clear that they were to respect my wishes if I wanted thirty minutes to write alone.

Day 1

I was in a group of five and all of us were part of the way through our drafts. We shared them in turn and asked each other questions about our pieces. At times I attempted to model questions such as:

'How do you feel about your piece?'

'What parts do you like about your piece?'

'Where will you go from here?'

I soon found the children taking more control of the situation, and so I withdrew from the role of model and became just another member of the group. When it was my turn I read my piece, including the precis, and told them of my dilemma in naming the main character (so far) and trying to make him sound convincing. I was pleased that they didn't spare my feelings — one actually said he thought the idea of calling the main character Hungry Jack was something of a joke — and they justified their opinions very clearly. I knew I would have to seek the opinion of a wider audience before getting too involved with this storyline. However, I still saw an opportunity to talk about leads, and I explained that I wasn't satisfied with the way I had begun.

I decided to try the strategy of writing alternative leads and asked the rest of the group to try the same strategy for their stories. We all took our leads to several other class members to get their opinions. I was the only one who decided to begin my story differently.

Day 2

This was another group conference of four people. We all shared our writing, although this time each member was at a very different stage — ranging from me, worried about my storyline and the credibility of the main character, to one child who was ready to publish and wanted help with finetuning the words as well as with the conventions.

I asked the children if they thought my storyline would work. This group was not entirely convinced about why the main character should be called Hungry Jack or Creepy Jack, and so I still had that on my mind.

Day 3

I had my writing typed up, notes and all, and read it to all the children from an overhead transparency. I told them about how the two small groups and I were concerned with naming the character.

They mostly liked the first three paragraphs, but they were more comfortable when I explained that I wanted to rewrite the first paragraph and give Hungry Jack more credibility if he was to play such an important part in the story. One child came up with the idea that the wind could blow the lid off the man's rubbish bin one day and the children would nickname him Hungry Jack from what they saw coming out of the bin. Other children posed questions they felt needed to be answered, and I followed these up eventually.

I also discussed a new lead with them at this stage, and this proved more popular than the original.

Days 4, 5 and 6

I spent thirty minutes on each of these days sitting with the children, rewriting the beginning of my story to give Hungry Jack more 'colour' and changing it all to the third person.

Day 7

Back to the group situation with a different group of children. I explained what I had done and told them that my next challenge was how to set up the main 'problem' of the story.

I wanted the group of children I had created as major characters to discover early in the story that builders were going to develop an area of land precious to the group. I had a mechanical difficulty: I was going to have them arrive while the builders (or real estate agents, as they later became) were discussing their plans, but this would make it hard for the children to overhear any conversation that went on without their being noticed.

Eva, usually a very quiet person, timidly suggested that the children might already be up in the trees where no-one would see them. This suggestion enabled me to go on with the writing, and I'll never forget the look of pride on Eva's face when I thanked her for such a great solution.

Days 8 and 9

I wrote a further three or four paragraphs sitting in with the class, sometimes joining in with their conversations or offering suggestions, sometimes talking about what I was doing and sometimes just getting on with it, as the mood struck me.

All this time, however, I was trying to observe any effects my behaviour was having on the children and vice versa, which I would note in my journal at the earliest possible moment after the daily writing session was over.

Day 10

One child, David, and I shared each other's writing, particularly looking for sense and a feel for the things that worked best and why. I also invited a colleague to hold a conference with me on my piece. We sat in the room as two writers amongst twenty-seven. I told him of my concern about the Hungry Jack character, and he suggested that if the children were happy about it, perhaps I should stop worrying. I also mentioned my anxiety about writing authentic children's conversation and he suggested that I should look to the children for further support.

Essentially he was saying that I now had to write the story — which we could both see was turning into a novel — and that until I did so, I wouldn't know what was working and what wasn't. Although he made a point of not directing me, he made me face up to what I was really doing — putting it off for fear of failing. At this point I really felt for the kids who must have all had this fear at some stage. He also gave me some tips about where to get legal advice on how to stop real estate deals going through, so that my story would have some realism.

Days 11 and 12

This was the weekend, but I couldn't wait for Monday. I wrote almost continuously for those two days, although I was still only about a quarter of the way through the book.

Day 13

In our shared literature session that morning I read the first two chapters to the children, pointing out all the changes and giving credit to each child who had helped me with certain parts.

Later that day I read the chapters to a group of Year 7s to check on what age group I was writing for. I told them the story was intended for nine- to ten-year-olds and they agreed it was suited to them, but they felt it was also suitable for children of their own age.

Day 14

I read chapters three and four to my class and specifically asked for feedback on the following questions:

- Is the conversation convincing?
- Do you find the part about Hungry Jack and his sister easy to understand?

- Do you understand what is meant by 'This one was a rotter'?
- How do you think Tim and Jane are feeling at this point?

Because it was becoming a longer piece than ever anticipated, I felt that I might lose the class's support if I spent too much time getting them to conference me as a whole class. I therefore decided to continue to be more selective about what I wanted help with, and to ask at greater intervals. I also told the children that as soon as the typist had caught up with my 'finished' pages, they were welcome to borrow the book at any time.

What I learnt

Some very interesting things happened to me during this exercise, which have convinced me that writing with children has a very important role in fostering a community of writers.

- Previously I had thought of us as a close community of writers, but I now believe that earlier sessions in which I had modelled writing for the children had limitations due to my own attitude: I thought of myself as doing the children a favour, without experiencing any of the real risks that children are expected to take every day. This time, although I wanted to see long-term benefits for the children, I wanted to write for myself as well. In the process I had to share my anxiety and satisfaction, and they were real, not acted. I am positive that the children saw the difference. When sharing my writing, whether in small groups, with one other person or with the whole class, I realised how much courage it must require for some children to take this step and how important it is to allow children to retain ownership of their writing.

- I learnt things about certain children I probably wouldn't have observed otherwise. The best example of this was Eva, who solved the problem of how the children would be able to overhear the conversation between the two real estate representatives. I now know that she has the ability to find suitable solutions to the problems associated with creating a plot.

- The children were most helpful when I asked for specific help, e.g:

  'It's important to me that the things the children say sound real. Can you help me by telling me what *you* would say?'

  'Do you know what I'm saying when I use the words, "But this one was a rotter?"'

- The more help I had in the early stages of the writing, the easier it was to continue. Although it meant having to have a number of conferences in the first few days, the children's involvement decreased as my needs became less.

- Sometimes it was more important to me to be allowed to talk about my piece than to read it aloud. I gained the confidence to go on by telling the children my plans and getting feedback, rather than through the actual writing itself. The same applied when I had a conference with my colleague. At other times I wanted to read certain parts and get others' opinions on them.

What the children learnt

Children involved made the following comments:

> *If I have a problem in my story, I can go to someone and ask them to give me an idea and help me solve it. I felt pleased when Mrs MacLeod used my idea about .... I like it when Mrs MacLeod writes with us.*

I've been describing what's actually happening better. I've learnt the meaning of some words in the story that Mrs MacLeod wrote. I always thought that because she was older, she would know more. Now I think children can help adults too.

Hearing the conversations between the children in the story made me try it in my detective story to help other people understand the story.

I learnt that the children had to learn something about Hungry Jack (in the story) before they would like him. I ask people for help more often than I used to.

Conclusion

My writing for the children and with them seemed to promote an atmosphere of friendly trust between child and child, as well as between teacher and child. It has promoted my ideal of developing a happy, productive community of writers.

WATCHING CHILDREN TEACH THEMSELVES TO WRITE

Betty Weeks

Betty Weeks was teaching a Reception / Year 1 class at Semaphore Park Junior School when she wrote this article. She describes her role in the development of the children's writing and, in particular, the importance of sensitively observing children's learning processes.

I teach twenty-eight children, twenty-three of whom commenced school at various times over the past eighteen months, and five of whom are Reception children. I was fortunate to have the assistance of a student teacher for some of the first term and the beginning of the second term, when the children were finding it difficult to write without continually requesting adult attention. However, since the end of the second term most of them have been willing and able to manage without my help for most of the time. The new Reception children, who commenced school in the past four months, have generally been quite happy to accept the patterns they found established, and they have joined in the daily writing sessions from their first days of school.

The main aim of my writing program is to allow the children to learn to write in the same manner that they have been learning to read — following the developmental model described so well by Don Holdaway in *Foundations of Literacy* (Ashton Scholastic, 1979). The characteristics of such a model apply equally to reading and writing, which are after all complementary activities. Holdaway's description of developmental learning — that style of learning used by children in their natural environment, supported by loving parents — could be summarised as follows:

- highly individual and non-competitive

- short on teaching, long on learning
- self-regulated, rather than adult-regulated
- related to fulfilment of real life purposes
- emulating the behaviour of people who model the skill in natural use
- immediately rewarded for approximations in the right direction
- involving a great deal of repetitious, self-initiated practice of skills and approximations.

As far as possible within the constraints of the classroom, I have been trying to provide for this type of learning about writing. We have a regular writing period of half an hour each day. The children choose their own subject and type of writing: factual, story, letter, diary, list, words, letters, names, etc. They use whatever knowledge of writing they already have and practise various techniques to learn more. They use invented spelling, get help from each other, talk to themselves, consult word lists, and look for words, letters, phrases and ideas in various places.

My role has undergone a fundamental change since I began teaching writing. I don't set topics now. I don't supply the correct spelling of words. I observe, support and encourage. I have watched and listened closely as children have gone about their work, and have consequently gained many insights into how they are learning and how I can best help them.

My best ideas for helping children have come from watching them writing. In earlier years this priceless resource was unavailable to me, because I had instituted a practice that restricted the children's time, ideas and control. There was only one course of action available to them when they encountered a word that they couldn't spell: they brought their personal dictionary to me and I wrote the word for them. Our aim was that the finished product should be as perfect in the formalities of writing as was possible — no spelling errors, correct punctuation, etc. The inevitable consequences will be familiar to any teacher who has worked in this manner.

1 Some children tended to stick to words they knew how to spell.

2 Some children spent most of the session in the queue, waiting for words to be written into their dictionaries.

3 Most instances of 'writing from inspiration' were effectively extinguished by the 'stop-go' nature of the exercise.

4 I was tied to the one spot and couldn't get around the room to observe the work in progress.

5 The final products gave little or no indication of the types of problems individual children were experiencing at the time, of the areas where they could self-correct if encouraged to do so, or of any areas where they were experimenting with new aspects of language.

Nowadays the children write and I watch and listen. I have more time to see and hear what strategies a less able child is using. (The more able children seem to quickly internalise what they are doing, and the first I may see of a new skill is their finished product on paper.)

I suspect that many children who are slow to learn in their early days of school often remain 'slow learners' for much longer than may be necessary because they teach themselves ways of learning which are of no help to them in the long term. Further, they expend so much energy on these tactics that they block out other ways of learning which the teacher may suggest. For example, in group sessions where all the children are required to write some particular word or words on chalkboard or paper, they hesitate for a few seconds until someone else has started, then copy in a seemingly casual manner. If asked to reply to a question, they strain to hear the answer whispered by a nearby classmate. Or they might carefully watch the teacher's face for any change of expression and quickly alter their reply at the slightest

hint that it is wrong. Some children are so busy watching for this type of cue that they are incapable of really attending to what the teacher is trying to teach.

Children's strategies

In my new writing program, where every child is writing an individual piece, Martin (a child typical of those just described) is actually able to use some of these self-taught skills to advantage. Having long ago decided that it was not much good relying on teacher-led sessions to learn anything, he is quite adept at looking elsewhere. He was one of the first children to think of going to the *Breakthrough to Literacy* stand for words which he can recognise but not reproduce without copying. He gets other children to write words on scraps of paper so that he can copy them, and constantly refers to his alphabet sheet for letters he can recognise but not reproduce.

During the first couple of weeks of the writing program Martin copied other children's work outright (amid strong protests from the authors), copied from books (until other children pointed out to him the copyright signs) and from anything else he could see around the room. Next he started writing what I call 'pure Breakthrough' sentences, of the type that he has been producing continuously with his sentencemaker for the past six months (e.g. *I like Martin. I like Jane. I am a good boy.).* Now he is beginning to branch out cautiously, using words partly gleaned from around the room and partly with invented spelling. As a bonus, because of the way he has taught himself to learn and what he knows about himself as a result, he is a compulsive checker, constantly re-reading what he has written to make sure that it is right. It will be interesting to see if this trait persists as he becomes more proficient.

Other tactics used by the children include these.

1 Remembering that they have seen the word they want in their reader, sentencemaker or storybook, and then finding and copying the word.

2 Looking at signs, labels and words around the room to pick out the letter they need; searching for it anywhere. What should not have surprised me, but did, was the extent to which the children need to see a letter before they can write it down, even though they know what it should be. For example, Brenden might mutter to himself, ' ... puppy ... p-, now what does "p" look like?' He can then look at an alphabet sheet or any nearby print, pick out the 'p' and copy it into his work.

3 Asking each other:

'What does a "p" look like?'

'How do you spell ... ?'

'Is that a "m" or a "n"?'

'Where's "naughty"?' (referring to an alphabetical list of most used words, and running a finger along the 'n' line).

4 Saying the word aloud and writing down all the sounds they can hear. Sometimes they might hear the initial sound, sometimes only a sound in the middle, sometimes only the most dominant sound, sometimes the end sound, or a combination of any of these.

5 An extension of the above, in that they will then go back, say the word again and add any more sounds that they hear. They may add them in the correct place or just tack them on the end. Sometimes they put them on top of each other in an attempt to insert them in the correct place.

6 Using each other's names as sources for sound symbols they don't know, e.g. 'Sh' as in Sharon and Sherry; 'y' as in Sherry, Tony, Sally.

7 Writing the word on a piece of 'try' paper. Some children like to try out words on scrap paper. Though I stress that children need not worry if spelling is incorrect, sometimes they badly want a particular word to be spelt correctly. They write it on scrap paper and, looking at it, may realise that it is not quite the correct spelling. They may then bring it to me, if I am not too busy, or ask someone else. I like to get the children to pick out the bits they are sure are right, and to pinpoint the area of difficuly. If this is too hard, the incident would go something like this.

> Adrian wanted to write 'worried'. He had 'r u r e d' on his try paper. I said, 'Well, you've got a lot of it right. You need a "w" to start with. You've got the two "r"s — that's right. You've got the "ed" right at the end. Yes, it does sound like a "u" in the middle, but we write it like this.'

Often a child will have omitted only one or two letters, but realise that it 'looks wrong' (e.g. 'fond' for 'found'). At the moment there are only three or four children in my class with such well-developed visual memories that they are continually worried by words that don't look right. As this skill increases, I will probably have to insist that such corrections are reserved for final drafts, but for the moment these children know that they can ask me for help if I am not involved with another child.

It worries me that close attention to spelling in the first draft may detract from the emphasis on writing for meaning and getting one's thoughts down on paper, but I feel I must take into account the individuality of the children in my class — and their individual learning styles.

I remember one particularly bright child, who could read before he started school, once sat staring at his misspelt word for the whole of the writing period. I had told him that I would not help with spelling errors because I wanted him to concentrate on the story itself and worry about the spelling later. Moral: if you want children to become independent, take control of their learning and develop their own learning styles, you must be flexible, bend the rules when necessary and follow rather than lead. The challenge and excitement for the teacher, of course, is in deciding when to do what: which course to follow with each child to enable all of them to reach their full potential.

My change in role

I rarely tell a child how to spell a word, as I do not think children learn anything useful from this sort of 'help'. Most children rarely ask me for this sort of help anyway, as they know it doesn't matter if words are spelt incorrectly. They know that my comments on their writing, after I have responded to the message itself, will be, 'You've got that right, and that right, and that right ...' rather than, 'You've got that wrong, and that wrong ...'.

As the children are at varying stages in their writing ability, I vary the type of support that I give them. Some children can write on alone — inventing their own spelling, using words they know, finding words they don't know and discussing their writing with their neighbour — and I only need to see their writing when they are ready for me to see it (usually when they decide it is finished).

Some children write copiously, but unless I get to them before they get too far, I know that they won't be able to read what they have written and that this is going to bother them. So I have to check on them now and then and get them to read to me what they have written so far. However, other children who write copiously are quite happy to say that they are not writing anything — 'just letters' (or letter-like shapes, as is often the case with Reception children). These I leave alone for the moment.

Some children write and are happy to 'read' the story, even though none of the writing bears any formal resemblance to what they are reading. If their story is long and involved, I have decided that I should not try to write it down — I haven't got the time anyway! Nor should I condense it into one short sentence — what a disappointment for a child to see

his or her marvellous story reduced to a few words! Instead I try to respond purely to the story: I ask questions, show interest, and leave it at that for the time being.

I have found that when children begin to understand the connection between sound and symbol, the quantity of their work often decreases but the message begins to become more recognisable. Writing becomes hard work for a while, but this does not deter them from wanting to do it. At this stage I feel that it is very important for me to *acknowledge to the child that I can see what he or she is learning*. Under the developmental learning model described by Holdaway, I would equate this, and indeed most of the help that I give children during writing time, with rewarding, encouraging, and reinforcing approximations in the right direction.

My comments, after I have responded to the story itself, become very specific. For example, when a child wrote 'm I s i d p l s d', which translates to 'My sister plays about', I said something like this:

> 'You've got the "m" for my, and for sister, you've got the "s", and you heard the "i" and "d" [not mentioning that sister has 't', not 'd' in the middle]. And you heard the "pl" in plays, and the "b" in about [not mentioning the reversal of 'b' to 'd']. You know lots of things about writing!'

With children at this stage, I am often around as they are writing. As I said before, it is hard work for the children, requires concentration, and does not progress if there are too many distractions. I think I can help by modelling the strategy for a few minutes before I move on to someone else, but I hope I am not interfering with their own mental processes. Children sometimes seem to need a long time to think things out for themselves, and I feel it is essential to allow them this time. Consequently I try to move in only when I perceive that a child is 'off task', but no doubt I am sometimes mistaken about this.

Sometimes I suggest that children sit next to someone who can help them. I have found that it is not always the brightest child who is the most helpful to a struggling classmate. The more advanced child often just wants to get on with his or her own writing. It may be better to get help from someone who is only a little bit more advanced, as these children, still thrilled with their own recent insights, may be bursting to teach someone else what they have just learnt. At the moment Martin, whom I described earlier, is the best helper in the class. In more traditional writing programs the slow children very rarely get the opportunity to help anybody else. In our daily writing sessions all the children are encouraged to help and seek help from each other. On one day Martin may be sitting at a table with Reception children and spend most of his time helping them. (I can hear him coaching Alison: 'Now say "Sally"? Can you hear the "s"? Say it again! S-S-S-Sally!'). The next day he may be sitting next to Adrian, the two of them writing letters to each other with much interaction, but with Adrian doing the teaching.

I must point out that the daily writing program is supported by daily shared book experiences and 'saturation' of the children with good quality children's literature. These essential components of my language arts program contribute to the growing feeling among the children that writing and reading are deeply satisfying human experiences, which deserve the wholehearted attention and intense concentration they receive in our classroom.

These are some of the things I am learning about how children learn. Now that I have stopped prescribing what the class should learn at any given time, I am awed by the diversity of language skills which individuals choose to practise, and humbled by the intensity with which they can go about their self-chosen tasks when given the chance. This is not to say that every day every child is working to his or her full potential. Some days nobody seems able to settle down seriously, the writing is generally mundane and careless, and I begin to think I should take up 'motivating' again. But always there is at least a small group of children whose work shows me they have made significant progress in some aspects of writing. More often than not, the next day nearly everybody seems to come in with renewed enthusiasm and interest. I no longer have the feeling that I must prop up the program by thinking up

interesting topics and building up enthusiasm in the children. There is a self-generating and powerful force at work — made up of the interests, ideas and concerns of twenty-eight five- and six-year-olds, and their natural urge to learn.

INNOVATION ON STORY STRUCTURES WITH YEAR 3s

Judy Bailey

Judy Bailey was teaching a Year 3 class at Croydon Primary School when she decided to work out how to improve her use of 'Innovations on a Literary Structure'. She describes how the children's writing and attitude to their writing changed.

For two years I had been making extensive use of the teaching strategy of innovating on literary structures (as proposed by Bill Martin in the *Sounds of Language* books). While it had been successful and the products from the children's innovative writing were impressive, I had some reservations and concerns about the place and worth of this type of activity in my writing program.

As I saw them, the advantages were these.

1 If children used the literary structure and language patterns within a story or poem, they would have no need to create their own structure and their ideas could flourish.

2 By using the literary structures and language patterns in literature, children would be actively involved in learning how language works.

3 Children would be role-playing at being mature writers and users of language.

4 As I had in my class a number of children for whom English was a second language, I felt that innovation would be valuable for all of the reasons outlined above, and also as a way of introducing and reinforcing new vocabulary.

The concerns and questions I had were these.

1 Would children *really* be able to let ideas flourish or would the imposition of a structure be a restriction? Would the ideas be made to fit the structure rather than vice versa?

2 Would directed lessons on innovating make the children aware of the process of writing as opposed to the product?

3 Was I using innovation to teach writing effectively or because it gave the illusion of success by yielding polished products?

4 What proportion of the total language program should be devoted to innovation? When? How? Why?

5 Was it possible to see positive growth in the children's writing as a result of innovation?

So, in an attempt to test some hypotheses and answer some of my own questions, I planned a language arts program which placed emphasis on finding out how language works, with innovation as the practical application.

What I did and what happened

At the beginning of the year I collected samples of the children's writing and, as expected, found that within the class I had a wide range of abilities.

I had children who had few literacy skills and were very reluctant to write. Typical behaviour of these children in writing sessions included over-use of rubbers, asking for the spelling of every word, copying randomly what other children were writing, and disruption or naughtiness — desperate measures to avoid the task.

I had children who had a good sense of 'how stories go' — keen, confident writers who enjoyed writing and experimenting with words.

I also had a middle-of-the-road group. These children managed to complete each task after much discussion and motivation to get them started, and with much help and encouragement along the way. They could often *tell* a lively, exciting, imaginative story, but found the act of writing a little daunting — frequently because their minds worked faster than their hands. Their frustration led to stories in a kind of shorthand, giving the basic facts with no frills, and as a result they were flat and uninteresting (see examples below). These children found the writing process an unsatisfying chore.

THE SPACE SHUTTLE

The space shuttle is going into space. The men inside it is going too. The space shuttle is in space right now, the space astronaut in space is having good fun in space. They are going back right now. at home. The space shuttle is going tonight You can see him.

A GOSHT NAMED FRED

Once there was a hanted house
a gosht live in it. his name was Fred
he was friendly he like people but one day he got mad and he called his friends
let scarm and he was're seen again
People cried.

Armed with this information, I returned to my hypothesis that innovating on literary structures would provide worthwhile and exciting experiences from which the children would gain valuable insights into the way language works: for example, they would come to see that poems and stories do have an underlying structure — the chunks of meaning and word patterns which make it sound 'right'.

I launched into a language arts program aimed specifically at raising children's awareness of literary structures. I read aloud many old favourites — fairy and folk tales, nursery rhymes and a variety of well-tried stories. I used shared book experience as the basis of the reading program. We spent much time discussing how our authors had put their stories together. The children became very adept at identifying the problem in a story and the attempts made to solve it, and at predicting when and how a story would end. We also used sentences for transforming (as suggested by Bill Martin) and the children enjoyed making new sentences. It was fascinating to note that even children who had language difficulties seemed to know intuitively what was right: for example, they never substituted a verb for an adjective or adverb.

The children wrote every day — usually some form of innovation on sentence, story, poem, song or chant — and, in addition, writing arose out of other language activities. However, the writing was instigated by me: I was the source of stimulus and the children had little or no responsibility in this area. Because the program was so structured, 'free writing' was incidental — squeezed out because of time constraints. A few children found time to follow their own interests, but most seemed happily occupied following my directions.

I noticed that the reluctant writers were writing more than ever before on set innovation patterns, and mechanics such as spelling showed improvement. However, there was only a minimal improvement on the earlier behaviour patterns when they were faced with a writing

The writing corner

task for which they had no set structure. They were still reluctant to take chances with writing.

The middle group seemed to enjoy the low level of responsibility the innovation lessons placed on them, and they were very enthusiastic about each task, often producing page after page of verses based on the same repetitive structure.

The able writers were becoming restless very early. At the beginning of a set writing task a question often asked was, 'How many verses – sentences do I *have* to write?' They would very rapidly dash off the target amount and then find their own task while the other children were working.

Something was wrong. The children were fulfilling my expectations, but the anticipated glow of achievement was somewhat dim. About midway through the term there was a mini-revolution in the ranks – led by the 'able' group. They began saying more often and more emphatically: 'Why can't we write our own stories?' ... 'Do we have to write *that*? I want to do this' ... 'Can we have more time on our own?'

At this point I decided to back off and let the children take the responsibility they so obviously wanted. I set up an attractive writing corner (large table, brightly covered and labelled pin-up boards decorated with a Colt Fairytale Frieze) and supplied tools (variety of paper – differing colours, shapes, textures – pencils and textas, folders, dictionaries). Stimulus materials such as poem cards, books and a story-starter folder containing pictures cut from books and magazines were also provided. Some of the books were:

Ingrid Hann, *Up Days, Down Days*
Florence Parry Heide, *Some Things Are Scary*
Walter Ernsel, *Did You Ever See?*
John Burningham, *Would You Rather?*
Rodney Peppe, *Picture Stories*
P. K. Hallinan, *That's What a Friend Is*

A specific time was set aside each day for writing. The rated the children as they felt they 'owned' that slot in the timetable. It was not inflexible – the children could negotiate to write at another time. I felt it was important for them to have a chance to get in the

mood and not to feel unnecessarily pressured into writing. For example, they were able to read during writing time and vice versa.

The children made one rule for the writing corner: it became a declared quiet area so that concentration could be maintained — pre-writing talk, conferencing, discussions, etc. were to be held elsewhere.

The majority of the class, in the initial period of the new freedom, wrote every day and produced a prolific amount. One piece of writing per week could be submitted for typing and they looked forward to their conference with the school secretary, who discussed with them such details as layout and type of print required. The seriousness with which this was approached was delightful.

I did not initially direct the children in what they wrote — I gave them control in that area. However, in other language activities discussions of how stories and poems were structured continued, and if, for example, we learned a new song, chant or poem, or read a story, I would suggest possibilities for innovation, leaving it to the individual whether to follow them up or not. In fact quite often some of the children would try to write their own version. For a Space Week theme several children decided to write 'space' poems, basing them on structures we had already used (e.g. 'Down by the Station'). It was not innovating on structures that they had been rejecting earlier, but rather my control over what and how and when they wrote!

The reluctant writers still proved to be a problem and my dilemma was: 'Do I leave them alone to find their feet in writing, or do I intervene?' I intervened!

I gave them a chance to do their own writing each day and spent time talking with them, but there were two or three who just did not get started. So I insisted that they follow up one of my innovation suggestions two or three times a week — often as a small group under direct instruction. I chose stories or poems which stressed a particular vocabulary or structure already introduced, e.g.

- *Did You Ever See?* (Ashton Scholastic) for practising rhyming words and digraphs
- 'Opposites' from *Language and How To Use It*, Bk 2 (Scott Foresman) for antonyms
- 'colour' poems for adjectives and colour words.

With this group, too, I spent time building up group stories, in this way demonstrating how to set about writing a story. The rest of the class was not excluded from these activities; they had the choice of tuning in if they were interested.

What I learnt

In evaluating my writing program and what had happened, I went back to the concerns listed earlier to try to answer some of my own questions.

I felt that for some children some of the poems I had used for innovation imposed a structure they neither wanted nor needed to write on that idea. For example, in a lesson during which we were innovating on 'Four Fur Feet' from *Sounds of a Pow Wow* (Scott Foresman), Zoi began using the structure for the first two lines and then deviated from it to put in her own ideas which did not fit the pattern.

Oh he flew to space and to mars
In his silver rocket and if I was a
silver rocket I wood flew to space
in his silver rocket he staid all day in space
I went with him
I like it in space

However, innovation did give children an opportunity to experiment with words and word patterns that they might not have used in their own writing. One of the disciplines of innovation

is finding the right combination to fit the rhythm and 'sound' of the language used by a particular structure.

The directed innovation gave the children some insights into the writing process, in that their first drafts often needed editing to maintain the structure (for instance, ideas needed to be expressed differently to match rhythm or rhyme; decisions about what to include or exclude were required; story lines needed to be rearranged). These insights required individual conferencing and much discussion, which is an important part of the whole learning process. It takes time and considerable practice for children to become active participants in such discussions — and Year 3 children, I find, are often satisfied with the initial product and reluctant to undertake changes. Having an 'original' as a point of reference is helpful in encouraging the editing process.

I initially began using innovation on poems as it gave children the illusion of success: it was relatively easy for them to produce a polished product. It was also easy to produce easily readable books that even the slowest reader could master. It would have been all too easy for this to become the main visible sign of successful teaching, but, as has been shown, it was not totally satisfying. Innovation needs to be used judiciously — to serve a purpose which will help children verbalise their insights into the way language works, and/or add to their storehouse of structures which they can draw on when writing. For this reason the original texts used for innovation need to be chosen carefully, with a specific aim in mind.

The proportion of any program given over to innovation will depend on the needs of the children, the experience they have had in writing and the purposes for which innovation is to be used. I somewhat deliberately set out to test an 'overkill' approach and the children let me know when enough was enough. This was by no means a bad thing as the children were taking over responsibility, at least in part, for their own learning, but were doing so after having been given alternatives. They also had a grounding in how to go about writing.

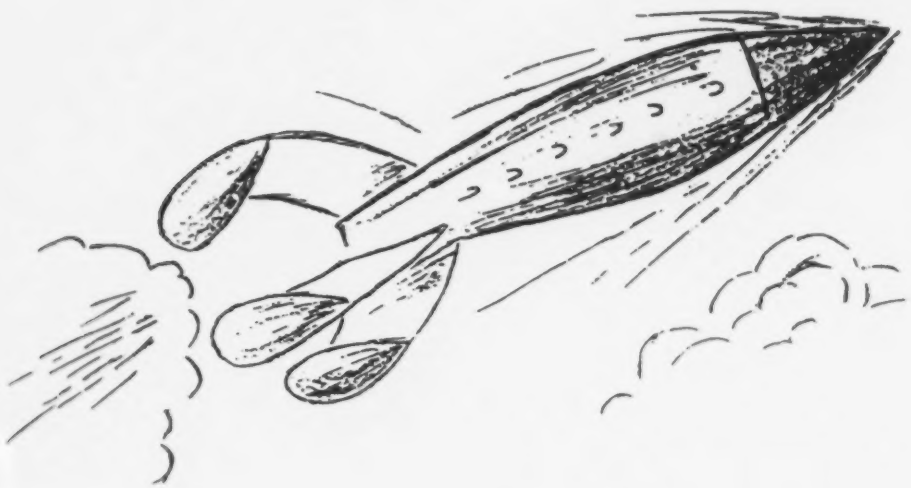
The results of my combination of innovation and discussion on story structure throughout the language program can be seen in Mark's story, 'The Rocket Ship'. This story uses a popular repetitive structure found in many children's stories, but was written without teacher direction or help.

THE ROCKET SHIP

One day there was an old lady who lived in the country but she did not like living in the country but she did not have a car so she could not go to the city. One day she was sleeping and she heard a noise so she went outside and saw a Rocket on her garden and a little boy came out and said 'Do you want to go back to the city'. 'Yes' said the lady. 'Can you take me back to the city'. 'Only if you get some fuel'. 'Okay' said the lady, so she went off to get some fuel. First she came to a man that was walking and she said 'Can you give me some fuel?' 'Only if you get me some water'. 'Okay' said the lady. So she got the water from a lady who was cutting grass and she said, 'Can you give me some water'. 'Only if you get me a new pair of scissors.' 'Okay' said the lady. So off she went to get some scissors. First she came to a shop and said, 'Can you give me some scissors'. 'Yes' said the lady in the shop. So she went back to the lady who was cutting grass and gave her her new scissors. Then she got the water from the lady who was cutting the grass and she gave the man the water so the man gave her the fuel. So she went back to her house with the fuel. When she got there she gave the fuel to the little boy, but she said 'I don't want to go back to the city now'. 'Okay' said the little boy I'd better go now. So he got in his Rocket and waved good-bye. He started the engine and then he was gone and the old lady never wanted to go back to the city again.

In writing by other children, while the structure was not so clearly defined, the word patterns, phrases, etc. demonstrated that the children had built up a repertoire of language patterns or structures which they were able to use at will. This was a sign of growth in their writing which may, in part, be attributed to direct innovation instruction in combination with a

literature-based language program aimed at raising their awareness of literary structures. It is impossible to say positively which had the greater influence, but each has a part to play as an instructional tool.



Supporting Student Independence

CIRCLE TIME

Deonne Smith

Circle time is an organisational strategy that teachers use to provide opportunities for talk in the classroom. Deonne Smith recognises how it offers the chance to share understandings, feelings and concerns. In this excerpt from her study Natural Approaches to Assessing Reading, *she describes how circle time became a powerful tool for assessing reading development in her junior primary classroom.*

I find circle time particularly enjoyable. During circle time children and teacher discuss issues varying from a favourite book to what helps them learn to read. Circle time provides a forum where children are expected to articulate what they are doing or thinking and to identify what works for them. They are able to discuss openly their attitudes to reading, their interests and their perceptions of themselves as readers — all of which give valuable insights into a child's progress.

In my own classroom I have been paying particular attention to the strategies children are using to work out difficult words when they are reading to me, and to the high level of self-correction obvious in their reading. I have tried to discover if they can identify what they do that helps them to solve the problem of working out unfamiliar words in a text.

I believe that if learners know what it is they're doing that supports their learning, they are more likely to continue to use the process. I also believe that the combined knowledge of the group will present all children with more options to consider.

An example

During circle time I asked if anyone could think of something they did that helped them to work out 'hard' words when they were reading. Craig knew straight away: 'I usually look at the first letter and then have a guess. I just say a word that fits in with the rest of the story.'

I answered that I had noticed he sometimes used that approach and that it seemed to work for him. I wrote his response on a sheet of cardboard and said, 'That's one good idea — what else have people tried?' As other children responded, their ideas were recorded on the piece of cardboard and acknowledged. Not all children had something to contribute at first, but as the discussion developed, everyone managed to think of at least one strategy that they knew worked for them.

We read through the list and talked about some of the strategies. Eva, for example, did not feel that everything would work all the time: sometimes pictures were not helpful in working out a particular word. 'Sounding out' was discussed at length. Some children found this a particularly useful strategy; others felt that stopping to sound out a word actually hindered reading. We eventually agreed to disagree on this issue and put our list of useful strategies on display for future reference.

Routines, requirements, results

My whole class is usually involved in circle time, but on occasions I have also set up special interest groups. Circle time happens almost every day, although the topics of conversation

do not always concern language arts issues: I usually respond to needs or interests. For circle time to really work, however, it is important that the classroom climate is one which accepts and values individual differences, and one where children feel safe and supported.

I have found it vital to establish rules about classroom interactions. For example, you look at the person who is speaking, listen to what she or he has to say, respond to each other in a positive way, and offer alternatives, not 'put downs'. Above all, children's responses need to be taken seriously. Some children need to understand that this is not a game of 'guess the answer in the teacher's head', and it takes time for them to realise that I am genuinely interested in what they think. It is not always easy for children to analyse what they do, or discuss their understandings of the reading process. It takes time, patience and support.

Circle time provides a good opportunity for me to model the importance of thinking about how we learn to read. It is also an excellent way of getting an overview of the level of individual children's thinking within the class, their attitudes to reading and the range of different strategies they are using. The sharing of expertise is invaluable.

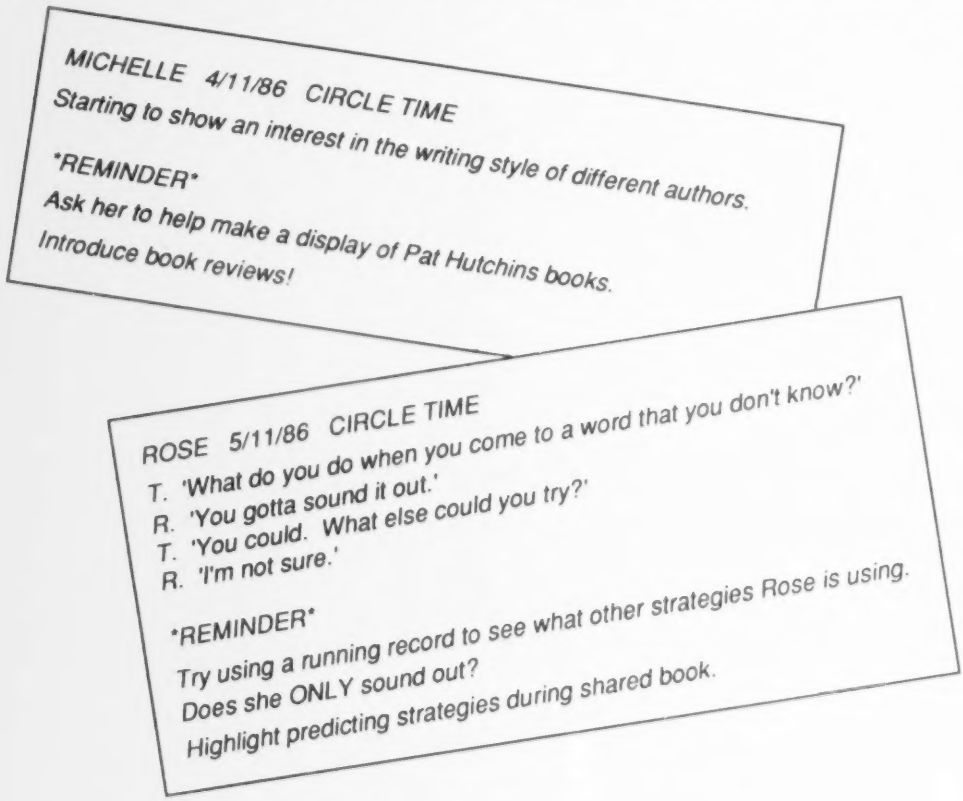
Recording information from circle time

Classroom displays

As I've already mentioned, large sheets on which children's responses are recorded can be displayed in the classroom. A bonus of this form of recording is that it provides information for other children, parents and visitors to the classroom.

Quick notes

Quick notes (or anecdotal records) taken during circle time are invaluable for recording important insights into children's thinking processes and their development. They are also an excellent


MICHELLE 4/11/86 CIRCLE TIME
Starting to show an interest in the writing style of different authors.
REMINDER
Ask her to help make a display of Pat Hutchins books.
Introduce book reviews!
ROSE 5/11/86 CIRCLE TIME
T. 'What do you do when you come to a word that you don't know?'
R. 'You gotta sound it out.'
T. 'You could. What else could you try?'
R. 'I'm not sure.'
REMINDER
Try using a running record to see what other strategies Rose is using.
Does she ONLY sound out?
Highlight predicting strategies during shared book.

method of jotting down concerns that may need to be followed up. If these notes are then dated and kept in a folder or card file, they help build up a picture of each child's reading development throughout the year.

I believe you need to record information about children at the same time as you collect it. If it's important — make a quick note and date it. That's your record! Records that are relegated to lunch hours, after school or the end of each term become almost impossible to keep up-to-date.

SELECTING BOOKS AND READING WITH PURPOSE

Barbara Comber

Barbara Comber is a senior lecturer at SACAE, Underdale, and has also taught in secondary schools. She is a fascinated observer of her two children as they become literate, and frequently observes in classroom. Here she considers what she has seen young readers do and what she knows about experienced readers, and raises some issues for teachers.

'I can't find Australian national parks in this encyclopaedia,' complains Lisa, a Year 5 student. 'I'm not surprised,' replies the teacher. 'It's an American encyclopaedia.'

Day after day in our classrooms teachers continue to be flabbergasted by what children don't know and cannot do. Often it seems so obvious to us that we fail to understand how the child could have missed the point. How do we solve the problem? Perhaps we have a lesson on using encyclopaedias, explain alphabetical order again, show the children which encyclopaedias or texts were printed where and when. What's gone wrong then when two days later you see the same child making the same mistake? 'They can't have listened! ... They don't care! ... They're not motivated!' Our teaching so sincerely done and so well prepared hasn't worked.

What has happened is that the teachers have attempted to impart what they know to the children without allowing the children the opportunity or time to go through the same learning process as they themselves did to find it out. Often we prescribe more skills lessons, more attention to detail, more breaking down into simple teachable parts, rather than allowing the children to tackle the real problems of learning, which involve making decisions, taking time, self-evaluation and making changes.

Lisa is in a Year 5 class where the teacher has decided to allow her students to take responsibility for choosing their own research topics and their own books, because she believes that self-selection is crucial to reading with purpose and putting the reader in control. She knows that it will take time for the children to become efficient and confident in locating, browsing, selecting and deciding what to use, but she believes that this is how they will become 'real readers'.

Selection is part of the reading process

Much of what we know about the reading process has been learnt from careful observation and analysis of fluent readers. Janet Hickman (1977) summarises their characteristics very neatly when she says:

> These are purposeful readers, critical readers, selective readers. There is talk of skimming, thumbing, browsing — an emphasis on making choices. And there is a matching emphasis on reflection and on making use of the material read, a recasting for new purposes.

The two readers she interviewed mentioned very little of their school experiences in describing how they learnt to read. One emphasised re-reading certain books over and over again as he grew up, each time finding new information that intrigued him, especially in anthologies and encyclopaedias. The other grew up in a house full of books and read constantly, even while brushing her teeth. Both cases seem a far cry from the single roneoed poem or paragraph I've offered in the past in an English literature lesson ... not that there's necessarily anything wrong with this, but when it becomes the whole literary diet, children must wonder about our tastes. No wonder they choose magazines instead. We've assumed that children find it too difficult to select for themselves, and yet we've been surprised when the teacher's and publisher's choices haven't worked.

What do good readers use to select texts?

Good readers become remarkably efficient in predicting what kind of text will meet their needs. Setting purposes for reading and choosing reading material need to happen together, so that the initial reading can be largely a process of checking to see if the book, article, etc. is suitable. Readers therefore need to have responsibility both for setting their purposes and for finding reading material which will meet them. However, this is not just a matter of luck or guesswork. Readers have a lot of information to help them make their initial choices, e.g:

- recommendations from friends
- book reviews and media reports
- experiences with an author's other works
- information on cover
- book club pamphlets
- classifications into genre and style of writing
- chapter headings/table of contents
- indexes
- introduction (non-fiction) or first chapter (fiction)
- layout, photos, pictures, diagrams, maps
- previous experiences with books which have helped them to form opinions on what styles of writing and areas of interest appeal to them, so that they can quickly recognise what they don't like and stop reading.

How does selection relate to reading with purposes?

Students tell us that some text book material is difficult. However, it is often not so much the text itself but the task the teacher has set that causes the difficulty. Matching the teacher-set task and teacher-selected reading material with efficient strategies for reading may be where the difficulty lies. This hypothesis is mainly based on experiences I have had in working with 'remedial' secondary students, sent to me because they were unable to do a content-area subject, such as Science, because they couldn't read. Rather than introduce new specific reading tasks, I worked with them through their assignments for particular subject areas. What I learnt from these students fascinated me.

David was sixteen when I met him. He was described as 'totally illiterate'. Not surprisingly he hated reading and hated school — a school which believed in individual progression and attempted to effect it through 'self-pacing booklets' in most subject areas. This meant that

students' learning was made almost totally dependent on reading set texts and completing written tasks, which often resembled traditional comprehension tests: viz, 'Read the passage and answer the following questions'. Now when your school diet is likely to be fairly similar for English, History, Geography or Biology, you have a real problem if you cannot read.

David really did not know what reading was all about. In the first session, when a colleague asked him to read a fairly simple short story, he started to sound out the first word — 'The'! After four months of reading aloud to him (because I couldn't think of what else to do), he began to pick up books and browse through them himself. Usually they were complex non-fiction, often scientific and technical topics ranging from UFOs to lasers and electricity. He began to read these independently, asking questions where the terminology was unclear, but they were his questions. He was in control. He became incredibly quick at deciding which books met his current needs and discerning how books were written.

The important implications for me were that readers need to be in control of what they read, and that we often make this impossible in schools.

Knowing that choosing appropriate reading material is difficult, we have chosen for the children and unwittingly created further problems for them. Children can only learn to make good choices by having the opportunity to select for themselves, and by observing and discussing other people's choices. David learnt to self-select and to read with purpose by being read to initially, setting his own questions and gradually taking responsibility for finding the appropriate reading material. Being read to is crucial for beginning and failing readers. Here the teachers or parents initially select, but they also do the reading, modelling for the children as they go, saying why they chose a particular book, what they like about it, etc.

Even young children can select

Of course children must start somewhere, and perhaps an adult's purpose is a good place. Watching others read for different purposes is important to children learning to read. Thomas (my own child) at 2½ years knows the difference between looking up a TV magazine to see when *Playschool* is on, finding an owl in an encyclopaedia and reading a story. He knows this because he has seen his father and me doing all three and has been actively involved in the process with us. He has watched us thumb through an encyclopaedia to find an owl and employs the same brisk page-turning action when looking through the same encyclopaedia, stopping at what interests him. (Thankfully he knows enough about reading not to ask us to read the encyclopaedia to him!)

Comments from Thomas have surprised and intrigued us.

> 'No, not that story — that's a scary one!' he often says at bedtime.
>
> 'No, that's not a bedtime story — that's a wake-up one.' (We have been unable to work out his classification system here!)
>
> 'I have to sit up for this story.' (Said in response to stories which have many different pictures of people or objects on one page, e.g. the fancy dress parade in *Dogger* by Shirley Hughes, or the 'introduction of characters' page in *Little Owl* by Leila Berg. He sits up so that he can point to various characters and name them.)

Children can become critical, selective and responsive to reading from their first experiences with print. But they won't suddenly be able to self-select and critically respond when high school demands it if they have had no experience of independence with books.

Thomas and many of his preschool friends have amazed us with their determination to choose their own books from an early age. Thomas has developed his own strategies for finding those books he wants us to read to him. Even when the books are tightly packed on the shelves and only the spines are visible, he quickly locates the title he has asked for. Obviously he uses colour, size and shape to make his initial guess; then he removes the book to check

if he is right. In series such as 'Meg and Mog' or 'Dr Seuss Beginner Books' he has a problem: they are all the same size and shape. He then has to check colour and pictures to see if he has the right title. In other ways series are useful because as a group they are easily identified and therefore quickly located. Older readers use this kind of information all the time in making selections.

Selection puts the reader in control

If children are presented with only one reading series and have limited experiences with books at home or in libraries, they may have difficulty in making selections. The following extract from a letter by a Year 5 teacher from Port Pirie, Michael Scollin, highlights the problem.

> *One thing the basal reader does is to take responsibility for selecting books — away from the child. I couldn't help thinking this ties in with the way feeding children sight words before a story kills any need to develop strategies to identify new words. Feeding basals can also have the effect of stifling the child's development of ability to be active in selecting reading material on the basis of interest. We have started going to the library once a week to do our daily Silent Sustained Reading sessions and on this day children have to select one book that will sustain them, not a number of books as they can on other days. This is to develop the skill of selection on their part.*
>
> *I think 'freeing' reading instruction really places 'responsibility' on the children themselves — we may initially see children 'flicking', trying very difficult books, etc., but gradually we see them slowing to read part of a book or finding books more suited to their interest. Also I have them recording the books they read on their own record card now.*

The reading process for habitual fluent readers starts with the self-selection of books. Unless readers are able to self-select, they are still dependent on others to determine the starting point in the decision about what to read. Obviously this greatly colours their attitude to the reading they do. They bring less conscious information with them because they have not been through the selection process for themselves and come to the book 'cold'. They may have few theories about what their reading material does, or how or why they should approach it. They rely on the advice of a teacher. Because the teacher has been through the process of choosing the book or whatever, she or he has done the learning and sorting through, knows which parts are most useful and so on. Often we forget that children need this time themselves to browse, make decisions, relate to what they know, sort out questions, etc. Perhaps we undervalue the importance of browsing in the 'reading to learn' process.

Teachers can enable children to take control in the reading process by allowing them to:

- decide that they want to read
- decide what they want to read about
- select their own reading materials
- establish their own task in relation to what they read (if there needs to be one)
- check the reading material continually to see if it has what they want
- decide they can stop at any point and get something else to read.

Many writers have gone into detail about strategies efficient readers use for different types of reading (e.g. Goodman & Burke 1983, pp. 21-22; Smith, Smith & Mikulecky 1979, p. 21). Self-selection and self-task setting can make non-fiction reading easier. In other words, as I've suggested, it is often not so much a reading difficulty that prevents students coping in high school, but an inability to read for the teacher's purpose (which is often the completion of a task, with the hope that learning will occur as a result — somehow). How the teacher-set reading material and the teacher-set tasks relate to what they know and can do baffles many students.

Now I do not mean to suggest that teachers should never set tasks or never set reading materials. I believe there are very good reasons why they should, but what I am saying is that when teachers take total responsibility for selection of materials and selection of tasks, they leave little room for students to set their own purposes for reading.

Teachers can help children to select their own books

There are many teachers who have explored these problems of textbook reading in relation to learning in their classrooms. They have tried to help children set their own learning and reading purposes by helping them understand how writers work and how books are written in the following ways:

- rewriting a chapter of a textbook, e.g. Mathematics, in small groups
- researching particular subtopics (in subjects such as History or Science) which they have chosen themselves using their own questions as guidelines, or the 'What I Know/What I Want To Know' approach (Goodman & Burke 1983)
- allowing children to use library books rather than a textbook
- allowing children to decide how they will present what they have learnt, e.g. as a talk, written essay, poster
- encouraging children to question as they read and jot down notes and comments to put to the rest of the class
- using anthologies and encyclopaedias to help children become selective even within books.

But what exactly is involved in the self-selection process and what are the implications for schools? Most readers will have watched other readers in bookshops, libraries and classrooms. What might they have noticed about the process?

- It is time-consuming. Even if one knows the book material one wants, few habitual readers can resist the opportunity to browse further. They may actually be sorting out what they'll read next, finding out if their favourite author has written anything new, and so on.
- There is much skimming and scanning, initially to locate and identify a title or an author (or perhaps even a topic classification in a new library or bookshop). The blurb on the back of the novel or the contents and index pages in information texts may be checked quickly. The process will vary, depending on the reader's purposes.

Teachers, then, need to provide time for children to self-select regularly, some guidelines for detecting level of difficulty, lots of books to select from (publishers will often help by arranging displays), used newspapers and magazines, and visits to different libraries. They also need to model the decision-making process by reading to the children.

What about when children always choose the easy stuff?

Many secondary students don't want to read. Many teachers say that their students cannot cope with the reading demands of their subject areas. Yet we all know those same students appear to breeze through an Asterix book or devour motor magazines or the latest copy of *Dolly*. As teachers, we are concerned when children in our classes don't or won't read, and yet we are afraid that if we let them read 'rubbish', that may be all they will read.

Teachers and parents often ask, 'Is it better that they read comics than nothing at all?' I always answer 'Yes', partly because habitual readers demonstrate this same tendency to 'stick'

on certain types of reading, — such as comics, magazines or easy fiction — and partly because we know that good readers have learnt to read by reading. Just because they read comics and the like, it does not mean that these children cannot or will not eventually move on to more complex material. Often children read 'easy' material because it is quick, satisfying and therefore confidence-building. It may take a lot of modelling of the reading of stories, poems or newspaper articles by adults, and subsequent discussion, before a child will feel the need to move on to new things. If we want children to become habitual, fluent readers, we must allow them to make their own choices while continuing to share ours with them.

Peter Dickinson (1970) cites some very real reasons why children may want and *need* to read what we teachers describe as 'rubbish'. He deals with the place of literature in children's culture, the need to discover reading material independently and the virtue of variety, and says of self-selection that although in children's 'random sampling':

> it is inevitable that a high proportion of what they read will be rubbish .... in the process they will learn the art of comparison, and subconsciously acquire critical standards, so that in the world they are discovering — even in the world of football comics — they will begin to work out why one strip is 'better' than another ....

But what if a child always chooses the same book? I once worked for a year with Colin, aged 15, who always read Raymond Briggs' *Father Christmas* before he did any other work in a lesson. Attempts to wean him were disastrous (though he did go on to read *Father Christmas Goes on Holiday* by the same author). Sessions where I tried to start another activity before he read *Father Christmas* never worked. Dickinson says that this re-reading of familiar and easy material has psychological value and that 'one can often tell how happy or insecure a child is feeling simply by what he is reading.'

Re-reading favourites and selecting easy texts have important functions in developing habitual, proficient readers.

More questions than answers?

I have attempted to show that there is a close relationship between reading with purpose and self-selection both in fiction and non-fiction reading, but there are many questions I need to take into classrooms and discuss with other readers.

- What kinds of purposes do fluent readers have?
- How do purposes vary from task to task?
- How do tasks affect reading strategies?
- How much are fluent readers aware of their purposes?
- How are teachers' and children's purposes different in reading?
- How do reading purposes differ when the reading material is self-selected?
- When does a reader set purposes?
- Are purposes relevant to fiction reading?

What we do know is that 'fluent readers get to be that way by reading, and by reading a great deal, from something of their own choosing' (Hickman 1977). Self-selection is part of reading, not an arbitrary decision made beforehand.

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THINKING ALOUD: CHILDREN OBSERVING CHILDREN

Roslyn Fryar

Roslyn Fryar, a Year 6/7 teacher at Morphett Vale West Primary School, was in the first year of her LLIMY tutor training course when she described her observations of what students learn when they observe each other.

An approach to assessment I have tried as a part of my LLIMY course involves asking students to 'think aloud' as they write. The theory is that teachers can learn a great deal about where students are in their development and how they complete tasks by getting them to think aloud as the teacher records what they do and say.

However, rather than set up a situation in which the students thought aloud and I observed and recorded, I decided to try a different tack. As part of a social skills program my Year 6/7 students had learnt how to observe each other at work in small and large groups. (They recorded eye contact, turns speaking, interruptions, how they encouraged each other, and time on and off task.) It occurred to me that they could employ these observational and record-keeping skills to make their own records of think alouds. In this way they would have a chance to learn at first hand about each other's ways of tackling tasks and thinking. I decided to start by doing a think aloud myself and asking the students to observe and record my ideas.

As an introduction to the lesson I talked about what can be learnt from saying what you are thinking. I stressed that knowledge about how other writers operate could help them develop their own writing. I then modelled thinking aloud as I wrote. At that time I was concerned about the students' opening sentences, their choice of words and their ability to paragraph effectively, and so these were the points I emphasised as I wrote. As I worked, they each recorded their observations.

The students' observations

Interestingly, very few students noted my concern with opening sentences; most of them were preoccupied with my re-reading before continuing writing. They also focused on my knowing when to use capitals and fresh paragraphs and on my concern for appropriate wording. As a sample, here are Renae's observations:

- *re-reads words*
- *re-reads and changes a word*
- *tells herself when she's not sure of a word she's used*

- *tells herself when to put in a question mark*
- *re-reads — doesn't sound right so changes and puts it in different words*
- *talks about what next*
- *tells herself when she's back on task*
- *makes sounds when she's thinking of a word she wants to use*
- *says word before she's finished the other word*
- *changes her voice as she's enjoying what she's writing*
- *tells us when she's finished.*

There was a general conversation at the end of my think-aloud writing session. The students discussed what they had recorded and the notion of re-reading was raised. I learnt that this was completely new to many of them. I had assumed that they re-read automatically as they wrote, but several stated quite adamantly that they never did.

The students were then asked to work in pairs, with each partner taking turns to do seven minutes writing and seven minutes observing. They were to share their observations with each other when the session was finished. These were Rachel's observations while she watched Renae writing:

- *smiles and pokes her tongue out*
- *she stares at something to think*
- *tells herself when to put a full stop*
- *gets angry and starts again*
- *looks at the sentence and thinks what to write next*
- *says 'um' when she thinks*
- *tells herself when to use a new paragraph*
- *checks how to spell a word*
- *re-reads some words to think what to write next*
- *puts 'equipment' into syllables to make sure she's right*
- *writes so it's interesting to listen to.*

The benefits for the students

For most students the major benefit was information about writing or being a writer. They discovered what other students did when they had 'writer's block'; they learnt more about re-reading and planning what to write next; they strengthened their ability to use full stops and paragraphing; they felt comfortable about making changes to words and sentences.

Some students have put this information to good use when writing in later sessions. Some have tried to use paragraphs for the first time. For many of them it is the first time that they have known that what they do when they write is acceptable behaviour.

The benefits for me

The major benefit for me has been a useful writing record, developed in the space of one lesson, on every student in my class. I now have a more detailed picture of what each student's writing behaviours are, and one that I could possibly never have obtained if I'd tried to compile each myself. I refer to these records frequently when I talk with students about their writing in conferences. I can update them as I see something new happening and use them when holding parent meetings.

The students' knowledge about writing behaviours and skills has been broadened considerably because they have begun to use each other as tutors. Significantly, the observation process has given them permission to consult each other, and writing time is now more productive because they use each other as sounding boards.

Is this a strategy that I can use again?

I intend to set up situations where students record their observations as I model a new writing strategy or a new genre. They can then discuss what they see and take what they need from their observations. I will also continue with students writing and observing each other as an important but not too frequent strategy in my class. The students feel empowered to question what I do and this gives them confidence to try new ideas and get feedback from their peers. Certainly this is an efficient way of finding out who needs what help in my classroom and provides many clues to ideas and strategies I can model to my students.

TALKING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT THEIR THINKING

Deonne Smith

Deonne Smith is a junior primary teacher who became an ELIC tutor, and then the South Australian ELIC Project Coordinator. She values what she discovers when children talk about their learning strategies and regularly plans for them to do that in her class. Here she shows how perceptive young children are and how much she learns from their explanations.

One of the most exciting teaching strategies I have adopted over the last couple of years is simply to make time for children to share the thinking processes they use to solve the many learning challenges they face.

How it started

My interest in this area was prompted by four children in my class, all six years old, who had progressed rapidly from placing a heavy emphasis on invented spelling in their writing to being very accurate conventional spellers.

I told these children what I had observed and asked if they could talk about what it was they did to help them remember the correct spelling of 'hard words'. I was amazed by the fact that, given some time to think, the children seemed to know exactly what they were doing and how this helped them. I was also surprised by the *range* of strategies they described. This is what they told me.

> 'I always break a big word into little words I can spell and then just say the little words over and over again until I remember them. Like "fantastic" is "fan-tas-tic". I do that even if the little words don't really make sense. Like "father" is only the words "fat" and "her" put together.' (Michell)

'Sometimes I make up a story to help me remember a hard word. When I wanted to remember how to write "hospital", I said, "A man named 'hos' fell down a 'pit' and his friend 'al' pulled him out"'. (Rachael)

'I look closely at the word really carefully and then close my eyes and try to get a picture of the word in my head and then I open my eyes and see if I'm right.' (Eva)

'I copy the word down and then I try and write it without looking at what I copied. Or sometimes, if I'm not sure how to spell a word I need, I just try writing it down and then I pick the way that looks right.' (Craig)

I became excited by the potential of children describing and sharing their learning strategies. The next obvious step was to share this valuable information with the whole class. A class session called 'circle time' was created with firm rules about listening and responding to each other (see p. 54). Sometimes I initiated the topic of discussion, but more often the children brought their own ideas, problems and insights to the group to share.

Certainly children learned a great deal from these sessions and, significantly, I learned a great deal about the children in my class that had previously been 'under the covers'.

Talking with children about their reading

Following the success of circle time, I became interested in questioning children as a way of understanding and describing their development. Later in the year, after I had taken on the positon of adviser and was no longer with my class, I decided to try interviewing children in order to gather information about their attitudes to reading and their understandings of the reading process.

Here is a transcript of a conversation I had with Wayne, one of the children I interviewed. Wayne was seven and just beginning to move into the 'early reader' stage of development.

Deonne: If you think a book may be too hard for you, what do you do?

Wayne: You look at it. You have a read of it and see if the words are too hard and you put it back if it's too hard. But, say, like a book might have a bad picture on the front, but it might still be OK inside. If I didn't like it inside, I could put it back and get another one.

Sometimes if I read a book like *Obadiah* and I say 'Obadiah fell in the pool' and then I read a bit and it doesn't rhyme, well I can go back and read it again and then I get it right.

Deonne: What kind of books do you like?

Wayne: I like *Sing a Song* and *In the Dark Dark Woods* because they are funny and good stories and fun to read. And the old favourite *Hairy Maclary from Donaldson's Dairy* and *The Cat in the Hat*. Actually I've got that in my bag.

Deonne: What helps people to become good readers?

Wayne: Practice. Sometimes the teacher gets something wrong and she reads it again and she gets it right too. So you can learn by what the teacher does, but if I didn't have a teacher or mum to help me, I'd still learn because you really have to learn yourself.

I like writing my own books and that helps me to read because I can write about a hard book like *The Boy Who Was Followed Home*, but make it easier for me to read.

Deonne: Why do you think people read?

Wayne: Because they like reading. Because they are good readers. Because reading is excellent. Because you get funny books sometimes like *Bears on Wheels*.

Deonne: Do you like reading?

Wayne: Yes, because it's good fun and I like reading to the teacher and I love funny stories, and I like the teacher to read to us, and I like reading to Tamara, and I like reading big books, and I like reading in the library, and I like borrowing books and I like reading to myself. I like to read to the whole class. I like to read *Funnybones* and I like when the man fell in the rubbish tin, because they had no one to scare so they scared themselves. I like *One Little Monkey in a Tree* because it's funny when he got stung by a bumble bee. I like reading at home and I like making books and reading them.

What I learnt about Wayne

I felt I had learnt something about his attitude to reading:

- he wanted to be able to read
- he enjoyed books, especially 'funny books'
- he knew reading was a pleasurable experience
- he enjoyed classroom reading experiences
- he was confident.

I also learnt about his understandings of the reading process:

- he knew reading needed to make sense and that he didn't have to read things that were too hard or that he didn't like
- he understood that good readers practise
- he had linked the writing and reading processes
- he had some understanding of the importance modelling had to him as a learner ('Sometimes the teacher gets something wrong and she reads it again and she gets it right too. So you can learn by what the teacher does ....').

Questions about Wayne

Obviously there was a lot more to Wayne as a reader than this interview revealed, and to support his development a teacher would have needed to ask some more questions like these.

He mentions re-reading. What other strategies does he use to help him self-correct?

What other strengths does he have as a reader? What else can he do? What does he need or want to become a more successful reader?

Can he self-select books that will allow him to read successfully? (Many of the stories Wayne had mentioned would have been too difficult for him to read independently.)

Does he realise that it is alright to ask for help?

How often does he read?

The value of talking with children

Talking with children can't give all the information teachers need, but such conversations can reveal a great deal that is not available from other sources. I see two main benefits:

- the teacher gains an insight into children's current understandings, attitudes and learning strategies
- children get an opportunity to talk about their understandings, beliefs and strategies, which helps them to clarify in their own minds what they are doing and how it works for them.

SPELLING CORRECTIONS: WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY?

Lyn Wilkinson

Lyn Wilkinson has taught in secondary and junior primary schools and was a member of the curriculum writing and teacher development teams that worked on the Education Department's Spelling Guidelines. She is now a Language Arts lecturer at SACAE, Sturt.

I used to make students write out their spelling corrections five or ten times each. However, in spite of this, they made the same mistakes when they used the words in their writing: they did not appear to be learning the words by writing corrections. So what could I do?

I realised that the major problem was that *I* was taking the responsibility for locating and correcting the errors. Re-writing the correct form, which I had written on the page, was just a mindless exercise for many of the students. So my first step was to make them responsible for their own spelling: they had to do the learning! I decided that I would only mark out errors if they agreed to do something about learning them.

During the first few weeks of the term I did nothing about spelling. The students wrote a lot of short pieces and from these I identified the poor spellers. There were about five students in the class who particularly concerned me. I talked with them individually and together we decided what to do about their spelling. They each chose the option which seemed best for them and I jotted down in my mark book what I had agreed to do.

The options from which the students chose were these.

- I would mark out every error in either red pen or pencil (their choice); they would choose three words which they really wanted to know and would learn them.
- I would mark out three to five errors which I thought the student should know (usually based on frequency) and the student would learn them.
- I would put an X in the margin next to lines which had errors in them (no more than three per page for chronic misspellers); they would identify and correct the errors.
- I would write the correct form for words they had misspelt more than once in a piece, or their own personal 'demons'; they then had to learn them.

The students also chose whether I wrote the correct forms on their piece of writing, or on another piece of paper.

Some strategies the students had for 'learning' their words were these.

- Tests at home on the words in their personal error book.
- Writing the words in syllables, saying the parts, then covering the syllables and writing the words fluently.
- Making a list of words they already knew which had the same pattern; e.g. if they confused 'where' and 'were', they might write in their books:

  where? when? why? which? what?

- Using the look-cover-write-check method.

I also found that a few minutes discussion with the students, giving them an idea for remembering the 'tricky part' of a word, was really helpful too.

Whenever possible I worked with these students in class. Once they had finished a piece of writing, I encouraged them to come to my desk and point out the words they had guessed at or thought were wrong. If a word was wrong, I often asked them how else it might be spelt and they wrote down alternatives, choosing the one that 'looked right'. Gradually I extended these strategies to the whole class.

This individual attention enabled me to find out what strategies the students were using and to supplement them. Students who used a whole-word approach found benefit from being able to syllabify, or from a discussion of different possible phonic representations for a sound. Students who were muddled by phonics were often helped by looking at the meaning connection between words — their roots.

All this may sound very time-consuming and cumbersome on paper. In practice, once I had taken the time to set it up, it was very easy to administer because most of the students needed only occasional help.

Why this approach worked

The poor spellers made steady progress towards more conventional spelling as their confidence grew. I think that they became more confident because:

- they knew they would not be penalised for incorrect spelling
- they knew it was acceptable to 'have a guess'
- they knew that their errors became the starting point for learning
- they had strategies for learning problem words
- they knew that I put more importance on the *ideas* in their writing than on their spelling
- they were working in a supportive, encouraging atmosphere
- they could see their own growing competence.

I had consciously tried to put responsibility for spelling back onto the students. In this particular class the method I have outlined worked well. It was certainly much more successful in helping students towards conventional spelling in their own writing than the rewriting of corrections. It is now an integral part of the way I 'teach' spelling.

REFLECTING ON ONE YEAR OF WRITING

Betty Weeks

While teaching a Reception / Year 1 class at Semaphore Park Primary School, Betty Weeks experimented with what she was finding out about 'the Graves approach to writing': that is, she made her writing much more child-centred. In this article she discusses the strategies she used and the ways these strategies developed during the year.

One year of invented spelling in a Reception / Year 1 class: children writing daily on topics of their own choice; two boxes of folders brimming with children's writing and drawings;

hundreds of tiny pencil stubs as mute evidence of continual use. The children, and I, have done more writing this year than ever before. Has it been worthwhile? What has been achieved? What will I do next year that is different from what I have done this year?

Raising the status of invented spelling

Most importantly, I will make sure that the children understand it is a good thing to use invented spelling for words they do not know. This was my biggest problem at the beginning of the year — perhaps because I was venturing into unknown waters myself, with secret thoughts like, 'Won't it teach them bad habits if they start spelling words incorrectly?' However, over the year I have watched many children working their way through the system and becoming more and more competent and confident.

Halfway through the year, having, I suppose, determined in my own mind that invented spelling was essential for beginning writers, I decided that it should be raised from the level of mere toleration. In my class it was going to be regarded not as a sign that the person using invented spelling did not know how to spell that particular word correctly, but as a sign that the inventor was a thinking, creative person doing something that people have done for centuries: when faced with a problem they have invented a solution! This may seem to be an insignificant factor, but I believe it is an attitude to writing which must be understood and fostered by teachers if they are to have success. In my opinion, invented spelling is only useful if children clearly understand that such spellings *are* inventions; that invented spelling is just a quick, convenient way of getting thoughts onto paper. Children must also understand that while their invented spelling may not necessarily match up with conventional spelling, this does not matter in the first instance.

As simply as possible, I told my class a little about the history of writing and printing. I told them how many people in many different parts of the world have invented all the things that people need, and how eventually, after using signs (such as a pile of stones to indicate water nearby) and drawings, they invented writing. Of course they didn't all invent the same writing. Because they were scattered all over the world, lots of different groups of people invented different ways of writing. I told them that inventing means finding the easiest way to do something that you don't know how to do. I told them that they could learn to write by doing what people did hundreds of years ago — they could invent their own writing and spelling. I had many conversations along these lines with individuals and small groups of children to encourage them to use invented spelling with a sense of pride rather than a sense of failure, and although at conference times most of the discussion is about the meaning of a child's piece of writing, I often say, 'And did you invent any spelling?'

Most of my Year 1 children are now writing with a mixture of conventional and invented spelling, and although I want them to use invented spelling with a sense of achievement, I also want them to use the conventional spelling that they know, and to make use of the 'natural' sources of conventional spelling around them, whether at school, home or anywhere else (e.g. signs, labels, books; the 'I've seen the word somewhere ... ' syndrome). I believe that inventing spelling helps them here. For, having invented the spelling of a word, children are more likely to take notice of the conventional spelling of that word if they encounter it later in their reading. In other words, as Claire Woods would say, having made a hypothesis about how the word should be spelt, they will then 'check it out' should the opportunity arise.

The children in my class have become extremely conscious of the words in their environment, and I believe that is because of their close, continual, personal involvement in inventing spelling. One example: the librarian told me that one of the children, on seeing the word 'orchid' on a display in the library, remarked that the 'c' sound in that word was the same as in 'school'. Children often discuss each other's invented spellings during writing sessions, sharing snippets of knowledge. The word 'once' had been the subject of many arguments and has been reinvented in a variety of perfectly logical forms — 'wn', 'wonc', 'wons', 'onec' ....

'Is this right?'

The question 'Is this right?' (in relation to an invented spelling which does not match the conventional spelling) needs sensitive handling by the teacher. After much trial and error, I think the discussion should perhaps proceed something like this:

Kathy: Is this right? *(shows the word 'Chrismis')*
Teacher: Oh, you've invented that word, have you? Good girl. Now, what part do you think is right?
(Kathy indicates 'Ch')
Teacher: Yes, I think you must have seen that word somewhere, and you've remembered most of it. Do you know where you've seen it?
(Kathy, or someone else in the group, finds a copy of the word)
Teacher: Now, let's look at them both and see what you've got to do. Yes, that's right, just put a 't' in there and change that 'i' to 'a'. You very nearly had it right the first time, didn't you? Good try!

If you are just beginning this type of program, you may find that children want to check with you almost every time they use invented spelling. You'll need to discourage this, or you'll be swamped! Just say, 'If you don't know how to spell it, invent it and keep on writing.'

The time factor

Writing takes a big slice of my Language Arts program, and for this I make no apologies. So much thinking, hypothesising, creating, reading, talking, listening, phonics, sight word vocabulary building, drawing and punctuating goes on that I have little need for separate work in many of these areas. However, two things which I have not cut down on are shared book experiences and reading to the children. The classroom is (of course) full of books, and the children, seeing themselves as writers, are extremely interested in the doings of professional writers and the details of published books. When Ben (6.0) wrote his second wolf story, he marked it 'C' for Copyright and 'EF' for Easy Fiction, and in keeping with the style of fellow publishers, wrote the date of publication, publisher's name (his own) and country of origin.

Some children need to copy

I found it very useful in the early days of the program to point out the © symbol in books, explaining that if authors put this sign in their books, no one is allowed to copy them. The children were very impressed by this 'law', and thereafter nobody copied from books, although several children were observed looking hopefully at the front pages of books 'in case they don't have the copyright sign'.

Some Reception children, when they first start school, have the feeling that they can't write anything without copying, and in the beginning I worried about this and tried to get them to write letters, names, anything, so long as they didn't copy. Now I'm starting to think that this puts unnecessary pressure on them. After all, many children know that a string of random letters does not mean anything and they don't want to write that way. So these days I let children copy, but I stipulate that they must know or find out what it 'says' first. They copy various sentences, nursery rhyme segments, etc. from around the room, but if they can't read it, they know they must get someone to read it to them first.

The importance of drawing in my writing program

With beginners, I encourage them to draw first, although some want to do what the other children are doing and plunge straight into 'writing' rows of letters, words, names and so on.

The question of whether to encourage children to draw bothered me a lot at first. I was afraid that if I let children choose between writing and drawing, they would choose drawing most of the time and never make progress with writing. Nevertheless I felt that drawing was a valuable thinking activity for young children which should not be discouraged. So I compromised by introducing a daily free drawing or painting period, timetabled as follows:

9.30-10.00	free writing
10.00-10.15	group conferences (optional) or continue writing
10.15-10.35	free drawing/painting or continue writing, read, or choose a quiet activity.

Although the free drawing period was very popular, many children still elected to go on writing, and after a while I saw that I was making an unnecessary distinction in separating the two activities. Now I still have the fifteen-minute group conference break in the middle of the period for those children who want it, but the rest of the time children may either write first or draw first. I have found that they can work out their own patterns, and as they grow in competence and confidence, most tend to write more and draw less, just as adults do.

The drawings and paintings the children do seem to be more intricate and detailed than before, now that they have equal status, as it were, with writing. Often in the past the drawings at the end of children's writings were a scribbled afterthought, hastily completed after the creative force had spent itself in the serious business of writing. Now, given the chance, the children are constantly delighting me with a variety of different ways of combining writing, painting and cutting and pasting.

> Sherry (6.3) made a house. The front door was cut out in the shape of a book, with the pages recording a conversation:
>
> 'Knock, knock!'
> 'Who are you?'
> 'I want to come in', etc.
>
> Adrian (6.8) made a big smiling face with words written in place of teeth.
>
> Chris (6.3) made a shark with layers of cut-out fins, a little bit of his shark story written on each fin.
>
> Laura (5.10) wrote about the Honey Bee float in John Martin's Christmas Pageant. She cut out a yellow beehive and some yellow bees and decorated her page with them.

The conversations which occur between children as they go about these self-chosen tasks are worth a hundred 'show and tell' sessions.

Group conferences

For all of this year I have concentrated on group conferences rather than individual conferences. I have found it necessary with beginning writers to be moving around the room as they are working, so that I can give help or encouragement when needed. However, as I've indicated, I do have daily group conferencing sessions after the first half-hour of writing/drawing. I have enlisted the aid of the Principal, Deputy Principal, Multicultural teacher and Recreation teacher, each of whom need give me only fifteen minutes of their time per week. This means that on four days of the week there are at least two regular people, not counting the odd parent or student teacher who may be available, to conduct group conferences. The children may choose whether they come to the 'circle' (either with me or one of the others) or continue with their work. If they join a group they need not read their piece if they don't want to, but they must listen and respond to other children's writing.

These group conferences are useful for several reasons. Firstly, they provide an important immediate audience. The children listen and respond to each other's efforts. They ask questions

about the story ('How did you think of that ...?', 'Is that all you're going to put?', 'What's a vet?', 'Is it true?'); they make suggestions ('You could say ... '); they praise and encourage ('That's good, Sharon', 'You remembered your spaces today, Joanne').

Secondly, group conferences function as training sessions for individual conferences later, when the children become more fluent writers. Soon, I feel, some of the children will be able to conference each other in pairs. They are learning how to be their own critics. In individual teacher/child conferences they will, I hope, be able to take charge of their own learning.

Thirdly, the conferences provide an opportunity for me to make notes of the progress of individual children in my Writing Records. I take my record book to the circle and, as the children are reading their pieces and talking about them, I have time to make specific notes on potential growth points and so on for future reference. At the same time, of course, I am on hand to listen, maintain order, help children who have difficulty reading their writing, and model appropriate questions and responses.

Modelling writing for children

One of my most useful teaching tactics this year has been the modelled writing session which takes place each day before the children begin their own writing. Most advocates of the process approach to writing suggest that teachers should write with the children. I used to feel guilty because I didn't do this, but I honestly thought that while the children were writing I needed to be moving around the room, giving help or encouragement when required.

Now I do my writing before the children start theirs. I get a large sheet of paper and write in big writing while the children watch and offer advice. I work on one story for about a week in the following manner.

Day 1 Decide on the topic. Get the main part of the story down.

Day 2 Add more. Put in words left out. Change a couple of things. Model the use of arrows, circling bits I want to change around, etc.

Day 3 Does it all make sense? Clarify any ambiguities. Add or delete if I want to.

Day 4 Fix up punctuation: full stops, capital letters, speech marks, etc.

Day 5 Reconsider. Check spellings and correct errors if any.

Modelled writing is a whole class activity where all the children can watch writing in progress and extract from the experience whatever knowledge they need at the time. Naturally, I invite ideas and opinions from the children all the time and make sure that there are opportunities for participation in a variety of ways.

Many of the techniques used in shared book experiences are directly applicable to modelled (or shared) writing. For example, when I wrote my story about the lost ladybird, I first wrote on my paper,

The lost l

and invited the children to guess what my story was going to be about. After considering various suggestions like 'lamb', 'lady', 'little boy' and 'lion', I added the 'a', which narrowed down the likely words. I then left a big space and wrote in the 'd' at the end, and someone correctly said 'ladybird'. (Incidentally, the ladybird topic was chosen to tie in with the current Social Studies questions on the needs of living things, and was effectively revisited during Social Studies time later in the week.)

The modelled writing story, on full view for about a week, also makes good reading material for the beginners. Because we read it together so often during the week, the children get to know it very well, and Reception children and others often choose to read through it at other

times during the day. I very kindly omit to put a copyright sign on this writing, and those Reception children currently going through a 'copying stage' sometimes copy parts of it during writing time.

Children need the satisfaction of having written

My underlying aim this year has been to have the children develop and strengthen their inner urge to write. I wanted them to experience, and to keep on experiencing, the pleasure and satisfaction of *having written*, so that such experiences would encourage and sustain them through the hard work of writing.

Regardless of the numerous other uses they will have for writing in later life, beginning writers should be allowed to explore the full potential of writing as a form of self-expression, like talking, playing, drawing, painting, music, movement, etc. Perhaps through this active exploration they will learn to use it in the most important manner of all — as a tool for thinking.

I have proceeded from the belief that all children will want to write as long as no one interferes or tells them, by words or by actions, that they can't. The reaction of children to the writing program this year has strengthened that belief.

Nothing, it seems, is more helpful or rewarding for teachers than sharing the experiences and insights of other teachers in other classrooms. This collection of teachers' writings should therefore be welcomed by all concerned with developing children's language skills within Australia and beyond.

It is the first of two volumes which together collect nearly forty articles drawn from the English Language Arts Newsletters issued by the Education Department of South Australia over the past several years. The articles explore a wide variety of teaching and learning issues over the whole primary age range, and each conveys vividly the writer's first-hand involvement with a particular class or particular children.

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